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10,000 Indian workers to reach Israel starting next week

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RBI asks Paytm to stop services after 29 Feb

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SPORTS

Mayank says he is fine and gearing up for a comeback

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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SALAR 360

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on 22 January at the site where Babri Masjid was razed. The Babri Masjid vs Ram Janmabhoomi is one of the longest disputes in the nation. Salar News looks at the 500-year-old dispute and the Ram Mandir's journey.

>>P5

Hindus allowed to worship in Gyanvapi Mosque

VARANASI, 31 JAN

The district court on Wednesday ruled that a priest can perform prayers before the idols in a cellar of the Gyanvapi Masjid here, a significant development in the legal battle over the mosque adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath temple.

The prayers will be conducted -- apparently at regular intervals -- by a "pujari" nominated by the Kashi Vishwanath temple trust and the petitioner who has claimed his grandfather offered puja at the cellar up to December 1993.

While VHP welcomed the order, Muslim side counsel Mumtaz Ahmed said they will challenge it in the High Court. The judge has said the plaintiffs can submit their objections before the court on 8 February.

The court has directed the local administration to make arrangements within seven days for prayers in the cellar. This will involve "proper arrangements" with metal barricades at the complex.

According to Hindu side counsel Madan Mohan Yadav, the barricades before the Nandi statue facing the mosque's 'wazukhana' will be removed to make way.

The order by judge AK Vishvesha comes day after an Archeological Survey of India (ASI) report on the mosque complex was made public. The ASI survey, ordered by the same court, in connection with a related case, suggested that the mosque was constructed during Aurangzeb's rule over the remains of a Hindu temple.

Wednesday's order was delivered on the plea of Shailendra Kumar Pathak who claimed that his maternal grandfather, priest Somnath Vyas, offered prayers till December 1993, advocate Yadav said.

He said the pooja was stopped during the tenure of chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav after the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya was demolished on 6 December, 1992. Muslim sides disputed the petitioner's version. It said no idols existed in the cellar so there was no question of prayers being offered there till 1993. The Muslim side had also countered the petitioner's claim that the basement was under his grandfather's control. *—PTI*

The prayers will be conducted by a "pujari" nominated by the Kashi Vishwanath temple trust **PHOTO: ANI**

NHAI gives 1 more month for FASTags KYC compliance

New Delhi, 31 Jan

State-owned National Highways Authority of India on Wednesday extended the KYC compliance deadline for FASTags till 29 February. On 15 January, National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) said FASTags with valid balances but incomplete KYC will get deactivated by banks post-January 31, 2024. To enhance the efficiency of the electronic toll collection system and provide seamless movement at toll plazas, the authority has taken the 'One Vehicle, One FASTag' initiative that aims to discourage the use of single FASTag for multiple vehicles or linking multiple FASTags to a particular vehicle, NHAI had said earlier this month. "Only 7 lakh multiple FASTags have been closed out of 1.27 crore. Hence, we are proceeding with extending the deadline by another one month," an official told PTI on the condition of anonymity. The state-owned agency also said it is encouraging FASTag users to complete the 'Know Your Customer' (KYC) process of their latest FASTag by updating KYC as per RBI guidelines. *—PTI*

State extends tenure of Backward Classes Panel's head

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

The State government has again extended the tenure of Backward Classes Commission Chairman K Jayaprakash Hegde till 29 February. This indicates that Congress government is yet to ready accept the the socio-economic and educational survey, popularly referred to as the Kantharaju caste survey report. Hegde's first tenure ended in November 2023 but the government extended it till 31 January. This is the second extension for the Commission to submit the report. The report is opposed by the dominant communities such as the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats who term it as "unscientific". Backward Classes Minsiter Shivaraj Tangadagi on Wednesday confirmed the tenure extension and signed the notification. *—Salar News*

Former RGUHS VC appointed Jayadeva director

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Karnataka government appointed KS Ravindranath as the temporary director of Sri Jayadeva Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences and Research. Ravindranath, 69, is the former vice-chancellor of Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences (RGUHS). He preceded CN Manjunath whose tenure ended on 31 January. Ravindranath is also a Professor at Cardiology department, Chief Academic Officer and Senior Consultant at Jayadeva Institute. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah will hold a meeting next week to decide on the permanent director. *—Salar News*

Hemant Soren arrested, Champai Soren new CM

ED grills Hemant for 7 hours after which he quits

RANCHI, 31 JAN

Enforcement Directorate on Wednesday arrested JMM leader Hemant Soren after over seven hours of questioning on money laundering charges in an alleged land fraud case, official sources said.

Before his arrest, Soren tendered his resignation as Jharkhand Chief Minister to Governor CP Radhakrishnan at the Raj Bhavan and was then taken to the ED office here.

Sources claimed 48-year-old Soren was "evasive" in his replies during his questioning and hence was taken into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The ED is expected to produce Soren before a special PMLA court here and the agency will seek his remand for custodial interrogation, the sources said.

The sources said the agency put across 15 questions to Soren during the second round of questioning in the case. He was first quizzed on 20 January.

The JMM leader was shown the typed statements he recorded with the agency and before taking him in custody, his signatures were sought on these documents.

It was, however, not clear if he signed them.

The allegations of money laundering against the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader pertain to the alleged illegal possession of certain immovable assets apart from his purported links with members of the 'land mafia'.

Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren submits his resignation to the Governor CP Radhakrishnan, in Ranchi, Wednesday, moments before his arrest **PHOTO: PTI**

The investigation is linked to a "huge racket of illegal change of ownership of land by the mafia" in Jharkhand, according to the central probe agency.

The ED has so far arrested 14 people in the case, including 2011-batch IAS officer Chhavi Ranjan who served as the director of the state's Social Welfare Department and deputy commissioner of Ranchi.

An employee of the Jharkhand land revenue department, Bhanu Prasad Prasad, was also arrested by the agency in the case.

The ED is probing the alleged "huge amounts of proceeds of crime generated by manipulation of official records by showing dummy sellers and purchasers in the guise of forged/ bogus documents to acquire huge parcels of land having value in crores'.

Soren files FIR against ED

Soren has lodged an FIR against senior Enforcement Directorate personnel at the SC/ST police station here over searches conducted by the agency at his Delhi residence.

Soren alleged that the ED conducted the search operation at his residence in the national capital to "harass and malign him and his entire community", officials said, quoting the FIR.

An ED team searched Soren's Delhi residence on Monday, and camped there for almost 13 hours in order to question him. The agency claimed to have seized Rs 36 lakh, an SUV and some "incriminating" documents during the search. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF BUDGET

Murmu hails Modi for temple, economy

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday said the centuries-old desire to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya has now become reality as she listed the achievements of the Modi government over the past 10 years.

In her 75-minute address to the members of both Houses of Parliament assembled in the Lok Sabha chamber of the new Parliament building, Murmu also hailed the armed forces for giving a befitting reply to terrorism and expansionism, an apparent reference to Pakistan and China.

In her maiden address in the new Parliament building, President listed out the economic reforms undertaken by the government that has transformed India from the group of "fragile five" to the "top five" economies in the world.

Murmu said the government's successful hosting of the G-20 summit had strengthened India's global standing and noted that Jammu and Kashmir, and the northeastern states hosted some international meetings of the grouping for the first time.

President said within five days of the opening of the temple, 13 lakh devotees had visited Ayodhya Dham. She termed the consecration ceremony at the Ram temple on 22 January as an "epochal moment".

Bill on tackling exam malpractices likely on Monday

The government is likely to introduce a new bill in Parliament next week to deal sternly with malpractices and irregularities in competitive examinations. Sources said it may propose a maximum jail term of 10 years and a fine up to Rs 1 crore.

The sources said the Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Bill, 2024 may be introduced on Monday but a final call is yet to be taken. The bill was cleared by the Union cabinet recently.

The sources said students will not be a target of the proposed law. It will essentially act against organised crime, mafia elements and those found in collusion, including government officials, with them.

The bill also proposes a high-level technical committee that will offer recommendations to make the computerised examination process more secure.

It is a central law and will also oversee competitive exams including Joint Entrance Exams and exams for admission in central universities. *—PTI*

What Murmu said

- Ram temple consecration is "epochal moment", centuries-old desire now a reality
- Farmers received Rs 18 lakh crore under Modi govt as MSP--a 2.5-fold increase from 2014
- Apprehensions over removal of Article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir are history
- Hailed Centre for dip in dropout rate

Violence in Manipur has been going on for the last nine months. The President could have at least appealed for restoration of peace in Manipur.

-Mallikarjun Kharge, Congress President

Sitharaman to present her 6th Budget today

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will on Thursday present the Modi 2.0 government's last Budget before the general elections, which is likely to contain a mix of measures for the economy and electorally significant segments like farmers and women.

She is expected to stick to being fiscally prudent while sprinkling sops on sectors like agriculture and engines of the economy that would create jobs and boost consumption.

The Budget would, however, provide an occasion to assess the fiscal health of the economy against the backdrop of robust economic growth. It would provide an occasion for the government to give a clear roadmap for achieving the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act (FRBMA) targets.

The budgeted fiscal deficit of 5.9 per cent of the GDP for the current fiscal is likely to be achieved, but it is nearly twice the FRBM fiscal deficit to the GDP target of 3 per cent for the central government. Correspondingly, the debt-GDP ratio at 54 per cent is also well above the target of 40 per cent.

Government may also enhance the subsidy allocation for some segments like farmers, women, informal sector workers and unemployed youth to strengthen domestic private consumption. *—PTI*

Raichur's Tipu statue garlanded with slippers

RAICHUR, 31 JAN

Karnataka's Sirwar town in Raichur is tense following the violation of the statue of the erstwhile ruler of Mysuru Tipu Sultan on Wednesday

Some miscreants garlanded the statue of Tipu Sultan with slippers in the wee hours of Wednesday and the people came to know about it in the morning, leading to widespread anger.

PHOTO: X

A large number of people have come out in the open condemning the incident and are staging a protest at the Tipu Circle. They have also blocked the road and torched tyres at the protest site, demanding immediate arrest of the people behind the vandalism. Police have rushed to the spot and are checking CCTV footage to get clues about the miscreants. More details are yet to emerge regarding the incident. *—IANS*

Sengol procession a new tradition

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Setting a new practice, President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday was accorded a grand welcome led by 'Sengol' while entering Parliament.

She entered the new Parliament Building escorted by Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla with an official carrying the 'Sengol', adopted as a cultural symbol by the government.

Murmu reached the new Parliament Building in a six-horse buggy.

Slogans of 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai', 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Jai Siya Ram' and 'Jai Jagannath' rent the air.

Droupadi Murmu arrives to address Parliament on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

WIFE FAINTS

Missing husband surfaces as woman after 6 years

RAMANAGARA, 31 JAN

A man missing from Ramanagara was found as a woman in Mysuru after 6 years. Lakshman from Ramanagara went missing in 2017 and was found as Vijayalakshmi in Mysuru in 2023.

Lakshman was married in 2015 and had two children. After he went missing in 2017, the wife filed a missing complaint suspecting he left because of the pressure of debts, according to a report by TV9 Kannada. Despite pressure from the family, his wife did not remarry and waited for her husband to come back.

- The wife filed a missing complaint suspecting he left because of the pressure of debts, according to a report.

Finally, Lakshman was found tracked through a video that surfaced on social media. Lakshman was present at a felicitation function for Biggboss Kannada transgender contestant Neetu Vanajakshi. The police spotted the now Vijayalakshmi in the video and found a resemblance with Lakshman. They contacted Rashmika, the owner of the video, who is a transgender activist and got Vijayalakshmi's address from her. When the police visited Vijayalakshmi's address, they found that there was no resemblance between Lakshman and Vijayalakshmi except the facial features. Vijayalakshmi also argued that she was not Lakshman and she did not know who Lakshman was. The police who almost left her residence, called out "Lakshman" and Vijayalakshmi immediately responded. The police immediately brought him to Ramanagara Police Station and when questioned about it, he said he was never interested in women and requested the police to let him go. He said he does not want his wife and kids and that he prefers his third-gender community members.

The wife who came to the station after hearing that her husband was found, fainted at the sight of her then-husband, now a woman. *—Salar News*

GAFX 2024: K'taka unveils AVGC Policy 3.0

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

IT& BT Minister Priyank Kharge launched AVGC-XR Policy 3.0 during the concluding day of Bengaluru GAFX 2024 here on Wednesday.

The new Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming and Comics (AVGC) policy aims to establish an ecosystem that encourages collaboration among hardware and software manufacturers, innovators and State government. A Centre of Excellence (COE) that will be started under the policy "will feature high-performance computing clusters, simulation labs and testing zones, educational programmes, workshops, and R&D activities in collaboration with industry experts, with a focus on emerging trends like augmented reality, virtual reality and AI in gaming", Kharge said.

Aiming to create 2.5 lakh jobs in the AVGC industry, the CoE offers incubation support for startups and access to funding channels, the minister said. However, the AVGC policy will also aim to promote responsible gaming and a digital detox programme to safeguard the well-being of the youth, Kharge said. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

BMRCL increases fine for harassing women on Metro

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) has increased the fine for harassment against women passengers in metro trains to Rs 10,000 from Rs 500 apart from lodging police cases. This decision aims to address the issue of harassment faced by women while travelling on the metro. This decision comes in response to an incident that occurred on 2 January, where a woman accused a male commuter of sexually harassing her at Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Metro Station, Majestic. The incident gained widespread attention after a video of the incident went viral. Following an investigation, BMRCL officials warned the accused and imposed a fine of Rs10,000.*—Salar News*

Justice PS Dinesh Kumar is new CJ of K'taka HC

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Justice PS Dinesh Kumar was appointed as the Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court on Wednesday and will have tenure of less than a month before he retires on 24 February. He is at present the acting chief justice of the high court after Justice PB Varale was elevated as a judge of the Supreme Court a few days ago. Kumar started his practice in High Court in the year 1990. He was appointed as an Additional Judge of HC in 2015 and as Permanent Judge in 2016. On 19 January, the Supreme Court Collegium had recommended his name to the government. He has served as a Senior Counsel for several Bengaluru's Corporations including BDA. *—PTI*

NSIL, Arianespace sign MoU for long-term alliance

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), the commercial arm of ISRO, and French satellite launch company Arianespace have signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a long-term partnership to support satellite launch missions. NSIL is a Government of India company under the Department of Space (DoS). The MoU aims at establishing a long-term partnership between the two companies to meet the global commercial satellite launch service market needs, NSIL said. It said as part of MoU, the heavy lift launch vehicle LVM-3 of NSIL/ ISRO and Ariane-6 of Arianespace would address global launch service market needs, meeting the demand for launching heavier communication or earth observation satellites as well as satellites for mega constellations. *—PTI*

PHOTO: SALAR

Tiger attack spurs forest Dept's action in Mysuru

MYSURU, 31 JAN

The forest department officials on Wednesday successfully capture an elusive big cat within hours of it attacking and seriously injuring two individuals in Naganapura village, Nanjangud taluk. The tiger had ventured into the land belonging to Nagendra, where it attacked Suresh, 45 and Nanjundaswamy, 40 as they were on their way home. The victims were admitted to the hospital for treatment. In response to the incident, officials and staff from the Hediala and Omkar Forest Departments swiftly mobilised and conducted a coordinated operation to capture the big cat. The operation culminated in the successful confinement of the two-year-old female tiger within a few hours. The forest department employed a cage to secure the tiger. *—Salar News*

Guv didn't reject ordinance on Kannada signages: Raj Bhavan

Govt was asked to present Bill before Legislature Houses for nod

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

A day after reports emerged that Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot sent back an ordinance mandating 60 per cent use of Kannada in signboards of business establishments, Raj Bhavan issued a statement that the governor has not rejected the said ordinance. "It has been returned to the State government with the advice to present the said bill before both the Houses of State Legislature for approval, since the notification for summoning both the Houses has already been issued which is scheduled to commence from 12 February, 2024," Raj Bhavan said.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday said the governor has sent the ordinance back to the government, and wants a bill to be placed before the Legislature *PHOTO: PTI*

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday said the governor has sent the ordinance back to the government, and wants a bill to be placed before the Legislature and passed, considering that the Legislature session is around the corner. Siddaramaiah said, "The Governor said place it (a bill) before the Legislature and get it passed, as by the time the ordinance came to him, the assembly session was called. Though we had sent the ordinance much earlier, by the time it came before him for signing the session was called. So he sent it back. He did not say anything else. It will be passed in the Legislature."

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Tuesday requested the Governor to reconsider the decision and give his assent to the ordinance. "The governor should not wait until the Assembly passes it (in the form of a bill). In the Assembly, we will pass it, no one will have any opposition to it. I appeal to the governor to clear it up as it is a sentimental issue. You are the governor of Karnataka, you should not pick holes in such issues. Has anyone from the public or political parties objected to it? No, no one has objected," he said.

Further noting that the Cabinet had approved the ordinance before the Assembly session schedule was announced, he said, "It is a matter of the State's pride and protecting our language and culture is our duty. Also, we did not want any confusion regarding it as there were protests. So, it was sent to the governor for assent, and I don't know why he sent it back."

Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot *PHOTO: ANI*

The Karnataka Cabinet had on 5 January, given its approval to an ordinance to amend the Kannada Language Comprehensive Development Act that mandates 60 per cent use of the state's language in signages. The law requires the use of Kannada language in the upper half of signboards, displaying the names of businesses.

The government had decided to take the ordinance route in the wake of violent protests by pro-Kannada organisations targeting businesses and establishments in Bengaluru for not giving prominence to Kannada.

The Budget session of the Karnataka Legislature is scheduled to be held from 12 to 23 February. *—PTI*

₹40,000 PROMISED

Manual scavengers have little hope from govt promises

BENGALURU, JAN 31

Karnataka government had promised to give a one-time cash assistance of Rs 40,000, houses, a monthly pension of Rs 4,000 and alternative jobs to manual scavengers in State as per provisions of Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Continuing with the promise, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar called identified manual scavengers from across State to Bengaluru to attend a conference to rehabilitate them. Speaking at the event, Siddaramaiah said, "There should be no manual scavenging in the State and if any incident is found, strict action will be taken. Our government is committed to ensuring civic workers live in dignity."

When Salar News spoke to some of the 2,000-odd Safai Karmacharis who attended the event, the reality was far from the assurances promised. Out of around 7,483 manual scavengers identified in the State as per a survey in 2020, around 5,683 are yet to receive the one-time assistance or any of the rehabilitation promises made by the State government.

On Wednesday, Siddaramaiah distributed the compensation cheques to manual scavengers from four districts in the State during the conference. Kolar was allotted a group cheque for Rs 2.84 crore, Mandya got Rs 2.47 crore, Bengaluru Urban got Rs 1.44 crore and Raichur got Rs 33 lakh. The participants at the conference were wondering when they get compensation from the total amount allotted for their district. Also, the participants from other districts were left wondering when they get compensation.

PHOTO: PTI

Speaking to Salar News, Kalakappa, a manual scavenger from Ramanagara, said, "I have been waiting for two years to get an alternative job such as cleaning staff. I have asked to run from pillar to post and submit the documents. Yet, there is no response from the government on the promises."

Many of the manual scavengers don't have proper documents confirming them as manual scavengers and don't operate any bank account either; these are hindrances to getting government benefits. "When we go to district collectors to get pension or some alternative jobs, they ask to go from one department to another. We came to Bengaluru, hoping the Chief Minister will address our problems," Kalakappa's wife said.

Uchangappa, Secretary of Safai Karamchari Association from Davangere district, said, "In December 2023, one person died in Davangere while he was cleaning sewage. The government announced compensation to the family, but till now nothing has been given."

As per the manual scavenging act passed in 2013, the State government should be responsible for providing them with alternative jobs, identity cards, housing and pensions.

—Salar News

K'taka Lokayukta raids residences of govt officials

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

The Lokayukta in Karnataka on Wednesday raided residences of government officials in connection with 10 corruption cases. The raids were conducted at 40 locations across 10 districts in the state.

PHOTO: IANS

Raids were conducted simultaneously in Tumukuru, Mandya, Chikkamagalur, Hassan, Koppal, Chamarajnagar, Mysore, Ballari, Vijayanagar, and Mangaluru districts.

Searches were conducted at the residences belonging to Hanumantharayappa, KRIDL, Tumakuru, Harsha, PWD, Mandya, Netravathi, CTO, Chikkamagaluru, Jagannath G, food inspector, Hassan, Renukamma, Forest Department, Koppal, P Ravi, Rural Development (W&S), Chamarajanagar, Yagnendra, MUDA, Mysuru, B Ravi, Assistant Professor, Ballary, Bhaskar, Vidyut Department, Vijayanagara and Shanth Kumar, Mescom, Mangaluru.

During the raids the officials found huge amounts of cash, gold and silver jewellery in the residences of the officials.

They conducted the raid on the office and residence of Mangalore electricity supply company (MESCOM) Executive Engineer Shantakumar, who allegedly amassed wealth beyond his known source of income. Shantakumar has been working in Mangaluru for the past six years, according to sources. The Mescom Attavar division office and the executive engineer's residence at Konchady were searched in the morning, police said. *—Salar News with Agency*

BR AMBEDKAR ROW

90 booked, 39 arrested over group clash in Hallare village

MYSURU, 31 JAN

Police booked 90 people and arrested 39 people in connection with a group clash in Hallare village in Nanjanagud taluk in Mysuru.

A dispute over the installation of a nameplate of Bhim Rao Ambedkar in Hallare village of Nanjanagudu town leads to a violent clash resulting in injuries to three policemen. More than 30 vehicles were damaged and injured 12 people. In the aftermath of the incident, cases have been registered against 90 individuals in three separate FIRs at Nanjangud rural police station. The police arrested 39 individuals from the two groups and sent them to judicial custody after a medical examination.

The clash unfolded as one group, led by Abhishek, was installing a nameplate at a roundabout near the village bus stand. The Opposition headed by Anka Nayka, expressed objection to the installation, leading to a verbal altercation escalating into a violent clash.

After the incident, cases have been registered against 90 individuals in three separate FIRs at Nanjangud police station *PHOTO: SALAR*

In his complaint, Abhishek detailed the ransacking of their building, stone-pelting, and damage to houses, tiles, roofs, and vehicles.

Simultaneously, Nayka lodged a police complaint against 25 people from Abhishek's group. The clash also resulted in an attack on the police, leading Police Sub-Inspector (PSI) C Jagadish of Nanjangudu rural police station to file a complaint against 27 people, including allegations of obstructing government work.

During the clash, PSI Jagadish and constables Nagesh and Kiran were also reportedly attacked.

Speaking on the matter, Superintendent of Police Seema Latkar said that the situation in Hallare village has been brought under control, and a peace meeting will be organised in the village soon. Police patrols have been increased in the vicinity of Hallare, Hura, and Hullahalli villages to ensure the safety of residents.

— Salar News

Green Index to rank govt infra projects

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Forest and Wildlife Minister Eshwar Khandre on Wednesday released the toolkit and manuals of Green Index initiative, a unique initiative to analyse, evaluate and rank environmental protection initiatives in government infrastructure projects and programmes.

A portal will be set up to list Green Index and it will be made available to the public soon. The portal will analyse the recycled materials used, energy efficiency, water saved and reused during the implementation of infrastructure projects in the State.

The grading will be based on measures taken for waste treatment and pollution control, sustainable development, reduction of carbon emissions, the emphasis on the conservation of biodiversity, measures taken to prevent the effects of climate change and global warming and disaster resilience.

Grade 4 having a dark green colour will be the highest ranking. It will be followed by Grade 3 (light green), Grade 2 (orange) and Grade 1 (red). This classification is done to promote the environmental performance of State development plans and programmes and improve environmental compatibility.

Developed in collaboration with Environmental Management and Policy Research Institute, and the Indian Institute of Science, this project is the first of its kind in the country.

—Salar News

'Don't give statement against Simmha'

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Bangalore City Civil and Sessions Court has issued an injunction against M Lakshman, the spokesperson for Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC), preventing him from speaking against Mysuru Kodagu parliament Member Pratap Simmha.

A complaint filed before the court led to a notice being served, summoning Lakshman to appear in court on 13 February. The court has explicitly directed him not to make any statements against Simmha in the media.

The legal action stems from a recent press conference held by Simmha, during which he faced critical remarks from Lakshman in a subsequent media briefing. Simmha took the matter to court seeking redress.

In response to Lakshman's comments, where he made remarks about Simmha's recent name change Simmha defended himself by saying Lakshman sarcastically interpreted the added 'M' as "mockery".

Lakshman alleged that Simmha had failed to fulfil promises to Kodagu district and accused him of making inconsistent statements. The legal injunction prevents Lakshman from making further public statements against Simmha.

—Salar News

RAKESH SINGH APPOINTED ADDITIONAL CHIEF SECRETARY

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

The State government on Wednesday appointed Rakesh Singh, IAS Officer of 1989 batch as the Additional Chief Secretary to Government. Rakesh Singh previously served as Additional Chief Secretary to the Urban Development Department, Bengaluru. Mohammed Moshin IAS Officer is appointed as the Principal Secretary to Government, Health and Family Welfare Department. Both the officers' transfer is followed by Jawaid Akhtar's retirement. *—Salar News*

Rakesh Singh *PHOTO: SALAR*

A portal will be set up to list Green Index and it will be made available to the public soon *PHOTO: PTI*

New advisory issued for monkey fever

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

The Health and Family Welfare Department has made it mandatory for patients testing positive for Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD) to be hospitalised.

KFD, popularly known as Monkey fever is a tick-borne viral hemorrhagic fever transmitted by the bite of an infected tick presented with high fever and body ache. Currently, there is no specific treatment for the disease other than the treatments for symptoms.

According to the guidelines issued by the health department on Wednesday, Primary Healthcare Centers in the affected areas (PHCs) are advised to stock paracetamols, IV fluids and DEPA oil, which is used to prevent tick bites for people visiting forests. The department has advised conducting sensitisation workshops for physicians including private practitioners, medical workers and other health ground workers.

KFD is prominent in many districts of Karnataka, including Shimoga, Chikkamagaluru, Uttara Kannada, Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, Chamarajanagar, Belagavi, Hassan, and Mysuru. The KFD patients should be closely monitored and the deaths should be audited within seven days. The department has instructed for awareness programmes about the disease.

—Salar News

SPHAEROTHECA VARSHAABHU

New species of burrowing frog found in City

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Researchers from national and international organisations have discovered a new species of burrowing frog in Bengaluru. Named 'Sphaerotheca Varshaabhu', this previously unknown species of frog has been thriving amidst the urban landscape of Bengaluru.

The discovery marks a significant milestone in biodiversity research and underscores the resilience of wildlife in unexpected urban ecosystems, said Chetan Nag KS, Associate Professor, Jain University.

Sphaerotheca Varshaabhu, meaning a genus of frog which welcomes rain, has been attributed to its behaviour of coming out of burrows during the early showers. "Sphaerotheca Varshaabhu has adapted to its urban surroundings in surprising ways, displaying behaviours and physical attributes that enable it to navigate the challenges posed by urbanisation. The discovery emphasises the need for continued exploration of urban ecosystems and the preservation of biodiversity in areas heavily impacted by human activities," the statement read.

The discovery marks a significant milestone in biodiversity research *PHOTO: ZOOTAXA*

- The lead researcher Deepak P stumbled upon the new frog species during a routine biodiversity survey conducted within Bengaluru city's urban environment

The lead researcher Deepak P stumbled upon the new frog species during a routine biodiversity survey conducted within Bengaluru city's urban environment. The team utilised advanced genetic analysis, morphological studies and bioacoustics to confirm the distinctiveness of this newly discovered amphibian. Deepak said, "This discovery challenges our preconceptions about where new species can be found. Such a unique frog has been living right under our noses in the heart of Bengaluru city is truly remarkable."

The findings are published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal Zootaxa, contributing valuable information to the global scientific community. *—PTI*

Kerala's PC George merges party with BJP

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, Kerala Janapaksham (Secular) Chief PC George merged his party with the BJP on Wednesday.George along with his son Shaun and other Kerala Janapaksham (Secular) leaders joined the BJP here in the presence of the saffron party's in-charge for political affairs in Kerala Prakash Javadekar and other senior leaders."Today, Kerala Janapaksham (Secular) led by P C George is merging with the BJP, showing full confidence in our Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji's vision to transform India into 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047," BJP national secretary Anil Antony said at a press conference at the party headquarters here. *—PTI*

3 new members take oath as RS MPs

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Three new members -- Satnam Singh Sandhu, Narain Dass Gupta and Swati Maliwal -- on Wednesday took oath as Rajya Sabha MPs.Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar welcomed the new members after the oath-taking. Sandhu, a nominated member, was the first to take oath in the Rajya Sabha, the Chairman said."You have created history. You are the first person to have taken oath in the new building of Parliament," the Chairman told Sandhu.Maliwal had to take oath again as her first oath was not considered by the Chairman, who again called her name. She had used some words which were not part of the oath. While Sandhu is a nominated member, Gupta and Maliwal were elected unopposed from Delhi.Gupta was renominated as Rajya Sabha member by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), while Maliwal was nominated by the AAP in place of Sushil Gupta. Chandigarh University founder-chancellor Sandhu was on Tuesday nominated to the Rajya Sabha by President Droupadi Murmu. *—PTI*

Mamata holds 'Jonosanjog Yatra' in WB's Malda

KOLKATA, 31 JAN

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday began her 'Jonosanjog Yatra' at English Bazar in Malda district, where Congress' 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' is also scheduled to enter during the day.The procession led by Banerjee started from the Malda Police Line ground and will culminate at the District Sports Association ground where she is scheduled to address a rally at 2 pm, a senior official said.During the day, she will also hold an administrative review meeting in Malda district and attend a government programme in adjoining Murshidabad.Security arrangements have been beefed up in the two districts in view of the Banerjee's visit.Notably, both Malda and Murshidabad are considered to be strongholds of the Congress.She is expected to make some new announcements in the health, education, and transportation sectors in Murshidabad district. Banerjee has been on a trip to the districts of North Bengal where she held administrative meetings. *—PTI*

Shiv Sena MLA Anil Babar dies at 74

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

Shiv Sena MLA Anil Babar passed away in Maharashtra's Sangli district in the early hours of Wednesday following a brief illness, sources said. He was 74. Babar breathed his last at a private hospital in Sangli, the sources said. Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde expressed grief at the demise Babar and said he has lost a guide and a close associate and the state has lost a senior representative of the people. Babar was the MLA from Khanapur-Atpadi in Sangli district. Babar's cremation will take place with full state honours, the CM said. *—PTI*

AAP to move SC on C'garh mayoral polls

BJP won polls in a defeat for the AAP-Cong alliance

CHANDIGARH, 31 JAN

BJP's Manoj Sonkar after winning the Mayoral polls in the Chandigarh municipal corporation on Tuesday *PHOTO: ANI*

Aam Aadmi Party on Wednesday failed to get any interim relief from the Punjab and Haryana High Court on its plea for setting aside the Chandigarh mayoral election and said it will approach the Supreme Court for an early hearing.

Congress and AAP held a protest here and a police complaint was also filed on behalf of their joint mayoral candidate and AAP councillor Kuldeep Kumar against the presiding officer, accusing him of tampering with ballot papers in the Tuesday election to favour the BJP which retained all three seats.

A division bench of justices Sudhir Singh and Harsh Bunger, which was hearing a plea filed by Kumar, issued notices to the Chandigarh administration, the municipal corporation, presiding officer Anil Masih and new mayor Manoj Sonkar, among others, to file their replies within three weeks and adjourned the matter till 26 February.

Chandigarh administration senior standing counsel Anil Mehta told reporters that the court refused to give any interim relief to the petitioner.

"We have been given a three-week time to file a response and we will do so," said Mehta. He added that the issue regarding the maintainability of the petition was still pending.

Kumar in his plea has sought fresh elections under the supervision of a retired high court judge, alleging tampering with ballot papers by the presiding officer. Both the officer and BJP have rubbished the allegations.The petitioner has also sought an investigation by an independent investigation agency into the "entire fraud" committed during the election process.

- Leaders and workers of AAP and Congress gathered near the Sector 17 police station close to the municipal corporation building

On Wednesday, leaders and workers of AAP and Congress gathered near the Sector 17 police station close to the municipal corporation building. Heavy police force was deployed and barricades were erected near the police station.

The protesters demanded action against presiding officer Masih. Senior Congress leader Pawan Kumar Bansal, Chandigarh Congress president H S Lucky and several AAP leaders joined the protest.The party announced a protest outside the BJP headquarters in Delhi on 2 February in which AAP convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Mann will participate. According to the plea, the "election was not held in a free and fair manner and there was a gross violation while counting of votes, with tampering of the ballot papers".BJP candidate Manoj Sonkar had defeated AAP's Kuldeep Kumar for the mayor's post, polling 16 votes against 12. Eight votes were declared invalid. *—PTI*

'TO STRENGTHEN BJP'

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee meets with a differently abled person during her visit to Berhampore in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, on Wednesday *PHOTO: PTI*

Cong-CPI(M) teaming up in WB, says Mamata

MALDA, 31 JAN

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday accused the Congress of teaming up with the CPI(M) to strengthen the BJP in the state in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

Banerjee, who was speaking at a public distribution programme here, said the TMC decided to fight the upcoming polls alone in West Bengal after the Congress declined her offer to contest two seats in the state.

Alleging that the CPI(M) had "tortured" people of the state during its 34-year rule, the TMC chief said she would "never be able to forgive" the Left party.

"The Congress does not have even one MLA in the state assembly... I offered them two Lok Sabha seats, both in Malda, but they wanted more. So, I told them I will not share a single seat with them. CPI(M) is their leader... have they forgotten the tortures of the CPI(M)?"

"I will never forgive the CPI(M). I will also not forgive those who support the CPI(M)... because by doing so they actually support the BJP. I have seen that in the last panchayat elections," she said.

Banerjee said she has "no objection" if anyone from the family of former Congress stalwart from Malda, the late Gani Khan Chowdhury, contests the election.

"But the TMC will also contest. They (Congress) will fight along with the CPI(M), to strengthen the BJP... only the TMC is capable of politically fighting the BJP in the state," she said. *—PTI*

RaGa's claim of Bihar caste survey nonsensical: Nitish Kumar

PATNA, 31 JAN

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Wednesday said Rahul Gandhi's claim that the caste survey in the state was conducted under pressure from the Congress was "nonsensical".

Talking to reporters three days after he dumped the 'Mahagathbandhan' in which the Congress is a constituent, and returned to the BJP-led NDA, Kumar also dismissed RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav's claim that he had made Bihar Chief Minister work towards fulfilling the 10 lakh job promise.

The JD (U) president asserted that he did not like the nomenclature of the Opposition bloc INDIA.

"His (Rahul) claim that the caste survey in the state was done under pressure from the Congress is nonsensical. Everybody knows that the initiative was taken by me only. Now, people are taking credit," Kumar said.

Addressing a public rally in Purnea district as part of his 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra', Gandhi had on Tuesday claimed that Kumar was feeling trapped after getting a caste survey conducted under pressure from the 'Mahagathbandhan' partners and the BJP "provided him with a way out".

PHOTO:PTI

Commenting on the Opposition bloc INDIA, Kumar said, "They were not doing anything... not even discussing about seat sharing. Frankly speaking, the name (INDIA) given to this alliance was not my choice at all. They decided on their own. Now, I have come back here (NDA). There is no question of going anywhere else".

Asked about his views on the Enforcement Directorate's action against Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren and RJD leaders, the JD(U) supremo said, "The investigation agency is doing its work. There were charges against them...and the ED is investigating those cases."The central agency had on Tuesday questioned RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav for over eight hours in connection with its money laundering probe into an alleged land-for-jobs scam.

Kumar also accused the RJD of doing nothing during its rule in the state earlier. *—PTI*

RaGa's car glass breaks due to 'sudden brake'

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with supporters during the 'Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra' in Katihar, Bihar *PHOTO: PTI*

MALDA, 31 JAN

The Congress on Wednesday claimed that the rear window pane of Rahul Gandhi's car got smashed when sudden brakes were applied as a woman came in front of the vehicle in West Bengal's Malda district.

In a post on X, Congress said, "A huge crowd had come to meet Rahul ji in Malda, West Bengal. In this crowd, a woman suddenly came in front of Rahul ji's car to meet him, due to which the brakes were suddenly applied. Then the glass of the car broke due to the rope used in the security circle."

"People's leader Rahul Gandhi is fighting for justice against the injustice being done to the people. The public is with them, the public is keeping them safe," it added.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, however, claimed the incident took place in the Katihar area in neighbouring Bihar. *—PTI*

'Nothing inconsistent with AMU being INI'

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

There is nothing "fundamentally inconsistent" with a minority institution being an institution of national importance (INI), the Supreme Court said on Wednesday while hearing arguments on the vexed issue of minority status to Aligarh Muslim University (AMU).

The observation from the apex court assumes significance as the Centre, in its written submission filed in the top court, has said that AMU is an institution of a "national character" and it cannot be considered as a minority institution irrespective of the question whether it was established and administered by the minority at the time of inception or not.

Article 30 of the Constitution deals with the right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions. *—PTI*

No CAA in TN, says CM MK Stalin

CHENNAI, 31 JAN

Chief Minister MK Stalin asserted on Wednesday that the DMK government would never allow the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) to be implemented in Tamil Nadu, as it discriminates against certain groups of people such as Muslims and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the country.

Stalin, who is on a foreign tour to attract investments to the state, cited Union Minister Shantanu Thakur's assertion on 29 January that the CAA would be rolled out within seven days across the country and blamed the state's main opposition AIADMK for voting in favour of the amendment when it was taken up in Parliament.

Expressing his stance on X, Stalin criticised the opposition AIADMK, saying if it were not for that party's support to the Citizenship Amendment Bill, it may not have become a law.

He pointed out that the legislation discriminates against Sri Lankan

PHOTO: PTI

Tamils refugees and Muslims.

When the DMK was earlier in the opposition in Tamil Nadu, the party staged protests against the CAA and conducted a signature campaign demanding that the legislation be repealed. After the party assumed power in 2021, the state government passed a resolution in the legislative assembly urging the Centre to withdraw the CAA, he pointed out.

Remarking that the people are bearing witness to the BJP government's actions that "go against communal harmony" and the AIADMK's "drama", Stalin vowed that the DMK government would not implement the controversial law. *—PTI*

NCP's Praful Patel backs 1 nation, 1 poll

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

The NCP faction led by Ajit Pawar on Wednesday said it supported the concept of "one nation, one election" and termed it a step towards a more synchronised and efficient electoral process.

Senior NCP leaders Praful Patel and Sunil Tatkare met former president Ram Nath Kovind, who chairs the committee on simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, and presented a memorandum on behalf of the party.

"Honoured to meet former President Shri Ramnath Kovind Ji with MP Sunil Tatkare Ji and presented him a memorandum on behalf of the Nationalist Congress Party, affirming our support for the 'One Nation, One Election' concept.

A step towards a more synchronized and efficient electoral process," Patel said on X.

A statement from Kovind's office said the former president met Patel and Tatkare as part of his consultations with political parties on the subject of simultaneous polls. *—PTI*

Protest against border fencing

AIZAWL, 31 JAN

Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), Mizoram's apex students' body, staged a demonstration in Aizawl on Wednesday, protesting against the Centre's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR).

MZP leaders said that Mizo people have been separated by international boundaries between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh, which were drawn by the British without their consulting them.

Alternate measures can be explored to address concerns such as drug trafficking and smuggling without "resorting to actions" that divide the indigenous Zo communities, they added.

The students' body has also written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the issue.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah, earlier this month, said that the Centre would fence the entire India-Myanmar border and scrap the FMR.

Four Indian states -- Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, share a 1,643-km-long border with Myanmar.

Chief Minister Lalduhoma had said that the state government did not have the authority to stop the Centre from implementing the decisions, but he was strongly opposed to it. *—PTI*

PIL against move to grant Kunbi status to Marathas

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

A public interest litigation (PIL) has been filed in the Bombay High Court challenging the Maharashtra government's move to grant Kunbi caste certificates to the Maratha community members in the state.

The PIL, filed on Tuesday by one Mangesh Sasane, who claims to be the Chairman of the 'OBC Welfare Foundation', said the state government by granting Kunbi certificates to the Maratha community was "eating into" the reservation of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The petition is likely to come up for hearing on 6 February, as per the court's website.

The plea challenges five government resolutions issued from 2004 permitting the Marathas to seek Kunbi caste certificates.

"Earlier, the process of granting Kunbi certificates to Marathas was difficult but with every agitation, the process was made easier. This was just to facilitate the Marathas (for reservation)," the petitioner's advocate Ashish Mishra claimed.

The petition said that in 2021, the Supreme Court declared the Maharashtra government's decision granting reservation to Maraths as unconstitutional."Now the government, by permitting the Marathas to get Kunbi certificate and enjoy reservation benefits, is giving them backdoor entry," Mishra claimed.

The state government recently issued a draft notification stating that blood relatives of a Maratha person, who has records to show he belongs to the Kunbi community, would also be recognised as Kunbi.

The government has invited suggestions and objections to the notification till 16 February. *—PTI*

ED issues 5th summons to Kejri

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Enforcement Directorate (ED) has issued a fresh and the fifth summons to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for his questioning in the Delhi excise policy linked money laundering case, official sources said Wednesday.

While it is understood that the fresh summons was for 2 February, an official confirmation was awaited. He has always called these notices "illegal". By issuing the fresh notice, the ED has again rejected Kejriwal's contention that the summons issued to him was "not in consonance with the law" and hence should be withdrawn.The agency is also expected to file a fresh supplementary charge sheet in the case and may name the AAP as a "beneficiary" of the alleged kickbacks that were generated through the excise policy. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF BUDGET

Development journey will continue, says PM

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Ahead of Parliament's last session before the Lok Sabha polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Wednesday that the country is touching new heights of progress and its journey of "all-inclusive and all-round" development will continue with people's blessings.

Modi greeted the journalists with "Ram Ram" (an invocation of Lord Ram) and noted that there is a tradition of not presenting a full budget before the polls.

"We will follow the same tradition and present a full-fledged budget before you after a new government is formed," he said, adding that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will in her budget, to be tabled on Thursday, come out with measures showing a direction.Modi also took an aim at Opposition MPs for frequently disrupting

PHOTO: PTI

Parliamentary proceedings, saying those habituated to creating a ruckus and disrobing democratic values should introspect as they meet in the last session before the polls.If these MPs enquire in even their own Parliamentary constituencies, they will find that no one remembers those behind such ruckus and disruptions, Modi said.

But those who benefited Parliament with their superb ideas, even if they were sharply critical in their views, are remembered by a very big section of people, he said.Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha had suspended 146 MPs in the last session for their relentless disruption of proceedings over a host of issues, including security breach in the lower House.

All of them will be participating in the Budget Session but the government has cautioned that bringing placards in the chambers and causing disruptions in violation of rules may invite disciplinary action. *—PTI*

7 killed as vehicle falls into gorge in Baramulla

BARAMULLA, 31 JAN

Seven people died on Wednesday when a vehicle they were travelling in skidded off the road and rolled down into a deep gorge in Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla district, police said.A passenger vehicle rolled down into a deep gorge in Boniyar area of Uri in the north Kashmir district, they said. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), Traffic Rural Kashmir, Ravinder Paul Singh, told PTI that seven people died in the incident while seven others sustained injuries.The bodies have been recovered and medico-legal formalities are being conducted, the SSP said.The injured persons have been taken to a hospital in Baramulla, headded.—*PTI*

Suspected Chinese spy pigeon released after 8 months

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

A pigeon, initially suspected of Chinese spying, was released on Tuesday after eight months from the BaiSakarbaiDinshaw Petit Hospital for Animals in Parel, Mumbai.The bird was caught by Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilizers (RCF) police in May last year. "It had copper and aluminium rings on its legs with Chinese-like script messages on its wings. After completing the inquiry, the spying charge was dropped." said a police officer.The police discovered that the pigeon was previously used in racing in Taiwan and had accidentally flown to India during an event. The hospital released the pigeon with police approval, stating its medical condition was fine. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Uttarakhand gets first woman chief secretary

DEHRADUN, 31 JAN

Senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer RadhaRaturi has been appointed as the first woman chief secretary of Uttarakhand, replacing Sukhbir Singh Sandhu. The order was issued on Wednesday, and Raturi, a 1988-batch IAS officer, is to assume the role immediately. With a career spanning both Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, Raturi holds the distinction of being the first woman to occupy the top administrative post in Uttarakhand. Originally aspiring to be a journalist, she briefly worked in media before succeeding in the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination on her third attempt. She initially joined the Indian Information Service(IIS), later switched to the Indian Police Service (IPS), and eventually joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), adapting her cadre to Uttar Pradesh after marriage. —*PTI*

Foul play suspected after man found hanging from tree

SAHARANPUR, 31 JAN

A 20-year-old youth was found hanging from a tree in Begumpura area of this district, police on Wednesday said. The family members of the victim named Anis said that he left the house after receiving a call but did not return following which they informed the police, Additional Superintendent of Police (Rural) Sagar Jain said. The victim's family members suspect that the accused allegedly killed him before hanging his body from a tree, Jain added.Further probe is on into the matter, police said, adding no arrests have been made so far. —*PTI*

10,000 Indian workers to reach Israel starting next week

Israel construction industry is in crisis as foreign workers leave

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

With Israel's construction sector suffering a severe manpower crisis post the 7 October conflict with Hamas, some 10,000 workers from India are to make their way here starting next week, industry sources said on Wednesday.

These 10,000 workers will reach in batches of 700 to 1,000 a week, a source in the Israel's Builders Association (IBA) told PTI here.

With Israel's bombing of Gaza for four months, and a ban on the entry of Palestinian workers and the departure of several thousand other foreign workers, the Israeli construction industry has been facing a deep crisis and several ongoing projects are getting either stalled or delayed.

Following the conflict, Israel has banned the entry of Palestinian workers. The departure of several thousand other foreign workers, the Israeli construction industry has been facing a deep crisis.

Israeli business daily The Calcalist in a report in Hebrew last week said that the quota of foreign manpower for the construction industry has been increased from 30,000 to 50,000 and that the Israeli government last month approved the arrival of 10,000 workers from India.

The IBA source confirmed to PTI that the details in the Calcalist report were correct.

The workers to arrive in Israel would be part of the private recruitment track, which was approved by the government in parallel with the bilateral (inter-governmental) track to enable rapid recruitment of workers into the construction industry.

The IBA is looking to hire workers also from other countries such as Mexico, Kenya and Malawi. Screening of workers is said to have begun three weeks ago in India, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan.

"To date, out of about 8,000 workers examined, about 5,500 have been found suitable for work in Israel the vast majority Indian," The Calcalist had reported.

The selection process is led by IBA's CEO IgalSlovik and IzchakGurvitz, who heads the association's division dealing with workers' issues and the selection team.

Israel's Ministry of Housing and Construction is currently said to be working on a proposal to increase by another 10,000 the hiring of workers through the private track.

This will increase the total quota of foreign workers employed in the industry from 50,000 workers today to 60,000.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a telephonic conversation with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi in December had "discussed advancing the arrival of foreign workers from India to the State of Israel."

Israel's Minister of Economy, NirBarkat, during his trip to India in April last year, had spoken to officials and his counterpart in New Delhi about hiring Indians in various sectors, including the construction sector.

The discussions then revolved around bringing in almost 160,000 people in various sectors.

About 18,000 Indians are working in Israel, mostly as caregivers. Most of them decided to stay back in Israel and did not leave the country during the war because "they felt quite secure" and "also because the salaries are quite attractive". —*PTI*

With the departure of several thousand foreign workers, the Israeli construction industry has been facing a deep crisis **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

MOVE DELHI HC

The court sought a reply from police in the matter and fixed 17 February for hearing the application **PHOTO: X**

5 Parl breach accused allege 'torture' by police

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Five of the six people arrested in the Parliament security breach case on Wednesday told a court that they were allegedly being tortured by Delhi Police to accept their association with opposition parties.

The submission was made before Additional Sessions Judge Hardeep Kaur, who extended the judicial custody of all the six accused till 1 March.

Five of the accused -- Manoranjan D, Sagar Sharma, Lalit Jha, Amol Shinde and Mahesh Kumawat -- told the court that they were forced to sign about 70-odd blank papers.

"Accused people were tortured/given electric shocks to sign and confess (to) the commission of crime under the UAPA and their association with national political parties," they told the court.

The court sought a reply from police in the matter and fixed 17 February for hearing the application.

The sixth accused in the case is Neelam Azad.

In a major security breach on the anniversary of the 2001 Parliament terror attack, Sagar Sharma and Manoranjan D jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery during Zero Hour on 13 December last year, released yellow gas from canisters and shouted slogans before they were overpowered by some MPs.

Around the same time, two other accused -- Amol Shinde and Neelam Azad -- sprayed coloured gas from canisters while shouting "tanashahi nahi chalegi" outside the Parliament premises.

These four were taken into custody from the spot, while Lalit Jha and Mahesh Kumawat were arrested later. —*PTI*

SC refuses to allow widow to terminate 32-week pregnancy

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Supreme Court on Wednesday refused to allow a 26-year-old woman, who had lost her husband in October last year, to terminate her over 32-week pregnancy. They said that the medical board has held that there were no abnormalities in the foetus.

A bench of Justices Bela M Trivedi and Prasanna Bhalachandra Varale refused to interfere with the January 23 order of the Delhi High Court recalling its earlier verdict of 4 January, allowing the woman to terminate her then 29-week-old foetus.

"It's a 32-week-foetus. How it can be terminated? It is a matter of two weeks, then you can give it for adoption, if you want," the bench said.

Advocate Amit Mishra, appearing for the woman, said if she is to give birth then it will be against her wish and that she will have to bear the trauma throughout her life.

The bench added that each and every point has been considered by the high court, including the opinion of the medical board.

Mishra argued that the woman is a widow and she will have to bear a life-long trauma and the court should consider her interest.

Justice Trivedi asked him, "Why should we consider only her interest?"

On 23 January, High Court recalled its earlier order allowing the woman to terminate her then 29-week-old foetus.

High Court had said that the woman then already at 32 weeks of gestation, can go to AIIMS or any other central or state government hospital for delivery, and if she is subsequently inclined to give the newborn in adoption, the Centre shall ensure that the process takes place smoothly and at the earliest.

It added that the respective government would bear all medical and incidental expenses in the process of delivery.

On 4 January, the court had allowed the widow, suffering from depression, to terminate her then 29-week-old foetus as continuation of pregnancy could affect her mental health and observed that the right to reproductive choice also includes the right not to procreate. —*PTI*

Security finds 70m-long Naxal tunnels in Ch'garh

RAIPUR, 31 JAN

Security personnel have discovered a 70m-long tunnel dug by Naxalites in a forest along the border of Dantewada and Bijapur districts in Bastar division which is used as a bunker cum dumping place, a police officer said on Wednesday.

According to police, they had received information about the existence of such an underground passage in the Bastar division in the past, but they have spotted it for the first time.

The tunnel was spotted on Tuesday in the Bijapur district forest when a joint team of security personnel from Dantewada was conducting an anti-Naxal operation.

Personnel belonging to the District Reserve Guard, Bastar Fighters, both units of the state police, and CRPF's 230th battalion were involved in the operation, he said.

During patrolling near Todopat-Uspari village, security personnel spotted the tunnel opening from a roof. Its openings were covered with long woods, bushes, and soil.

According to Barman, this is the first such instance in the Bastar region wherein an underground tunnel has been discovered. —*PTI*

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

Dense fog in Delhi hampers flights, trains

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

A layer of dense fog enveloped the national capital on Wednesday hampering flight and train operations, officials said.The city is likely to receive light rain during the day, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Zero visibility was reported at the Indira Gandhi Airport at 6.30 am as a thick layer of fog engulfed the area. The visibility remained the same till 9 am, they said.

The Delhi airport saw diversions of at least three flights on Wednesday morning due to bad weather, an official said.

Due to the "very dense" fog, several trains were running late, another official said.

According to the IMD, light rain or thundershower accompanied by gusty winds with a speed of up to 30-40 kmph is likely towards the evening or night. —*PTI*

IT rules on fake news: HC gives split verdict

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

A split verdict was delivered on Wednesday by a division bench of the Bombay High Court on petitions challenging amended Information Technology (IT) Rules dealing with fake news on social media.

Justice Gautam Patel sided with petitioners, while Justice Neela Gokhale supported the government. "The disagreement leads to a fresh hearing by a third judge," said Justice Patel in the courtroom. The third judge has been assigned to the Chief Justice of the High Court.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta agreed to a ten-day extension, ensuring the government wouldn't notify the Fact Checking Unit (FCU) until the judgement.

The FCU, under the Rules, would identify and flag fake, false, or misleading facts on social media.

If a post is flagged, the platform can either remove it or add a disclaimer. Choosing the disclaimer option means the platform loses its legal protection and could face legal action.

Stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra, the Editors Guild of India, and the Association of Indian Magazines filed petitions against the Rules, alleging arbitrariness and unconstitutionality and claiming that they would have a chilling effect on the fundamental rights of citizens. The Centre said, "it was not against any kind of opinion, criticism, satire or humour targeting the government. —*PTI*

Snowfall disrupts normal life in Himachal, 134 roads closed

SHIMLA, 31 JAN

Normal life was disrupted and 134 roads, including four national highways, were closed in Himachal Pradesh as the tribal areas received the first major snowfall of the year.

Intermittent snowfall has continued since Tuesday and more snow is likely as the local MeT office has issued an orange warning of heavy snow and rains at isolated places on 31 January and 1 February.

The snowfall and heavy snowfall forecast has brought cheers to the farmers and the fruit and vegetable growers, who suffered huge crop losses due to dry spell.

The wet spell is likely to be beneficial for the Rabi crops. The tourism and allied industries stakeholders are also exuberant as the long awaited snowfall is likely to give a boost to tourist arrival.

Roads and vehicles covered in snow after fresh snowfall at Atal Tunnel, in Manali on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

Manali and Shimla had suffered due to the monsoon disaster and the room occupancy on the New Year was about 60 per cent, the lowest in four decades.

The key tourist resorts of Manali, Dalhousie, Sangla, Narkanda and Kufri experienced moderate snowfall while scattered rains occurred in mid and low hills breaking the prolonged dry spell.

A maximum of 120 roads are closed in Lahaul and Spiti district as per the state emergency operation centre and about 400 transformers have been disrupted in the State.

The state witnessed driest January 2022 with about 99 per cent deficit rains and 83 per cent rain deficit in December 2023.

The snowfall is likely to cause disruption of essential services like water, electricity, communications and related services and reduce visibility, the forecast said. —*PTI*

1,000 CCTVs checked to arrest culprit for Khalistani graffiti

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Nearly 200 Delhi police personnel went through CCTV footage from more than 1000 cameras to arrest the culprit who was involved in making pro-Khalistani graffiti in Delhi's Tilak Nagar area.

The apprehended accused had made graffiti "Delhi BanegaKhalistan" will become Khalistan. As per the information received from the police officials, the apprehended accused is Jaswinder who is a resident of Dlehi'sTilak Nagar area and a cab driver by profession. The accused has informed the police that he was used by a friend of his for the task and he was promised Rs 15,000 for the same but he has not yet received the amount from his friend. —*ANI*

91 DEATHS IN 2023

Waiting for universal dengue vaccine, India battles 'silent pandemic'

NEW DELHI/ BANGKOK, 31 JAN

She was six when she got dengue. Three decades on, Pink's battle with the formidable disease often neglected in public health priorities is a narrative that unfolds in detail in the recesses of her memory.

The 36-year-old's vivid recall took her to Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok so she could get a vaccination against the debilitating mosquito-borne infection. There are no vaccines anywhere in the world that can target all the four variants of the virus and Pink is amongst the lucky few to be able to access a preventive - even if it only provides partial protection.

The available vaccines, covering only two serotypes, are largely inaccessible and unaffordable in most parts of South Asia, including India.

Beyond the prerequisites for receiving the vaccine, its steep cost and scarcity, experts shed light on the often overlooked problems associated with the tropical neglected disease that poses a threat to half of the world's population but lacks a cure or full protection.

In India, where there is no vaccine available right now, challenges are accentuated further due to a large population that is at infection risk and a high number of under-reported cases, said experts.

Three experimental vaccines that target all four variants of the virus are currently in clinical trials across the world **PHOTO: ANI**

A recent study by researchers at Bengaluru's Indian Institute of Science (IISc) revealed that the dengue virus has undergone "dramatic" evolution over the last few decades in the country, underscoring the urgent need to develop not just a vaccine but also drug treatments specific to the variant in the country.

Three experimental vaccines that target all four variants of the virus are currently in clinical trials across the world, said Rahul Roy, an IISc scientist.

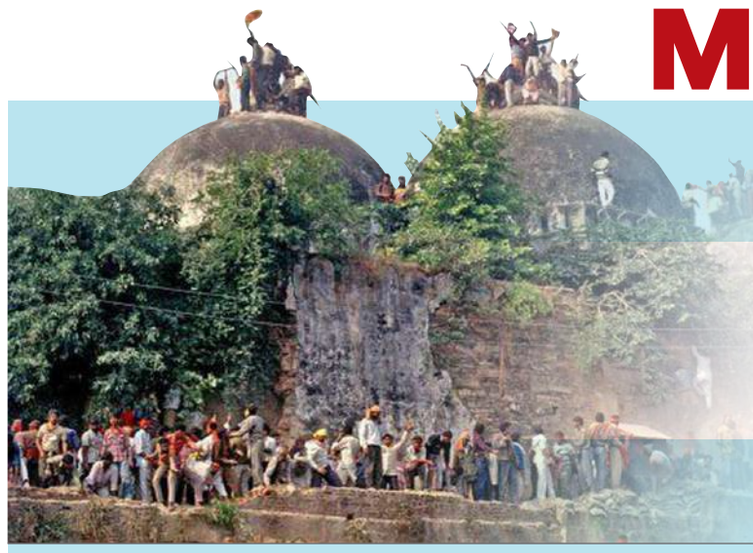
Most people with dengue have mild or no symptoms and will get better in up to two weeks. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache, muscle and joint pains, swollen glands, and rash. PanisadeeAvirutnan, chief of the Dengue Hemorrhagic Fever Research Unit at Siriraj Hospital, terms dengue a silent pandemic.

"One of the main challenges in developing a preventive is that the virus has four serotypes or variants, making it difficult to create a vaccine that can target all four equally," she

According to her, despite the genetic similarity of dengue variants, the immune response to one serotype does not necessarily provide cross-protection. She also highlighted the presence of genetic variations within the serotypes, making it even more challenging to design a vaccine.

The first registered vaccine, developed by the French pharmaceutical company Sanofi, exhibited an overall efficacy rate of 60 per cent but suboptimal protection against serotype 2 and the potential to cause more severe disease in previously uninfected children.

In 2023, India recorded 95,000 cases and 91 deaths by 17 September. In 2022, the number was 2.33 lakh with 303 deaths. —*PTI*



MANDIR-MASJID
THE GREAT INDIAN DIVIDE

Ram temple opened in Ayodhya after years of conflict. Here is how the controversial temple saw the light of day

1528: Babri Mosque was constructed by Mughal ruler Babur

1885: Mahant Raghubir Das files first case in Faizabad Court seeking to build temple next to mosque

1949: Ram idols 'appear' or are 'placed' in the mosque

1950: Hindu sides file suits seeking land

1959: Nirmohi Akhara seeks land possession

1961: UP Sunni Wakf board seeks possession of land

1984: Rise of Vishwa Hindu Parishad. LK Advani becomes face of Ram Movement and popularises the slogan 'Mandir Wahin Banega'

1986: Hindus allowed to perform poojas

1989: PM Rajiv Gandhi allows Shilanyas (consecration) by VHP

1990: Advani starts rath yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya. First attempt to demolish Babri masjid. UP CM Mulayam Singh Yadav asks cops to open fire at Hindutva mob marching towards the mosque. 16 karsevaks killed. Lalu Yadav arrests Advani in Bihar, leading to collapse of VP Singh government at Centre after BJP withdraws support.

1992: Karsevaks bring down mosque and put up a makeshift temple on 6 Dec

16 Dec, 1992: Liberhan Commission formed by PM Narasimha Rao to probe demolition. After 16 years, the Commission submitted report to PM Manmohan Singh and it said that the demolition was neither spontaneous nor unplanned, and found Advani, Vajpayee, Murli Manohar Joshi, Uma Bharti guilty

1993: State acquires 67.7 acres of Ayodhya land. Acquisition of Certain Areas at Ayodhya Act, 1993, passed

1994: Ismail Faruqui Judgment upheld constitutionality of Ayodhya Act

2002: Allahabad HC begins hearing in Ayodhya title dispute

2003: ASI claims it found 10th century Hindu Temple at mosque site

5 July 2005: 5 terrorists attacked the makeshift Ram temple and were shot dead in an encounter with CRPF, while 1 civilian died in the grenade attack that the attackers launched to breach the cordoned wall

2010: Allahabad HC splits land between Sunni Wakf board, Nirmohi Akhara and Ram Lalla Virajman

May 2011: SC stays Allahabad High Court's "strange" ruling.

2014: BJP came to power and for 2019 poll, it promised to build Ram Temple on the site of demolished Babri Masjid

August, 2017: 3 judge SC bench starts hearing.

Feb – July 2018: Petitioners argue SC ought to refer the 1994 Ismail Faruqui judgment to a 7-judge bench.

2 September, 2018: SC refuses to form larger bench

8 January, 2019: CJI Gogoi forms 5 judge bench anyway

8 March, 2019: Supreme Court orders mediation

9 Nov 2019: SC finally ordered the land to be handed over to Ram Janmabhoomi trust

2020: Govt forms 15-member trust for construction of Ram Temple

BABRI DEMOLITION

On 6 Dec 1992, 1.5L karsevaks listened to speeches by LK Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi, and Uma Bharat and others at Masjid. Allegedly their speeches called for the fall of Babri. FIR was filed against Advani, Joshi and Bharti and a probe found 68 responsible but they were exonerated by SC. PM Narasimha Rao faced criticism for not stopping Babri's falling. Rao blamed UP CM Kalyan Singh, who had promised that Babri wouldn't be touched. In 1994, SC sent Singh to jail for one day. RSS was banned the following day

RIOTS

In 1992, 2,000 people were killed in 166 communal riots. In Mumbai, 900 were killed (mainly Muslims). Shiv Sena allegedly organised riots, which led to 1993 bombings — the first terror attack in India. Violence also spread to Bangladesh and Pakistan with Hindu temples being demolished

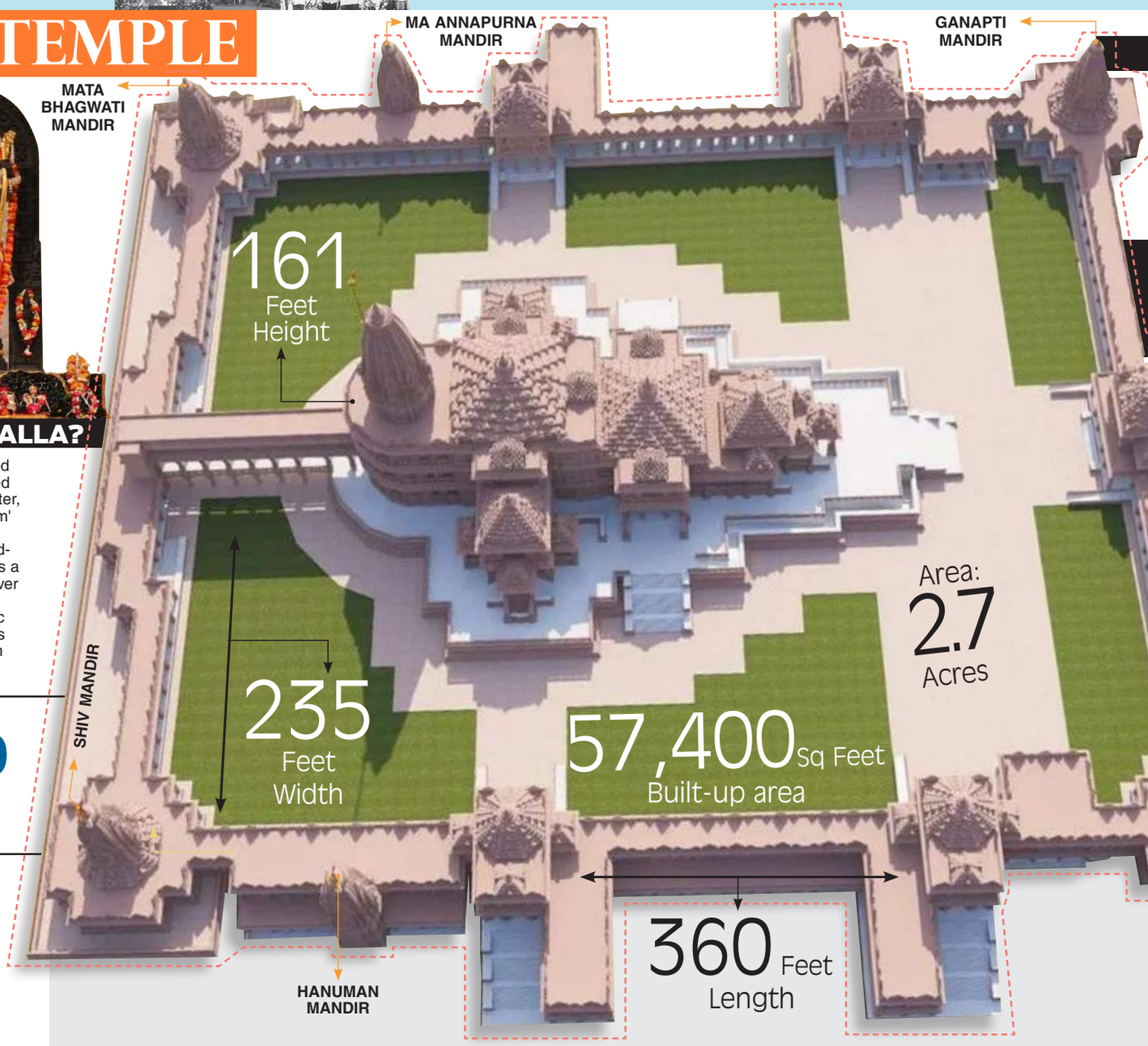
1998-2002

In 1998, BJP won LS polls on promise of building a Mandir. PM Vajpayee set up an 'Ayodhya cell' in 2002 and appointed Shatrughan Singh to hold talks with Hindu & Muslim leaders. BJP excluded Ram temple from its UP polls manifesto. After VHP sets a deadline of 15 March for construction hundreds of volunteers meet on site. A train carrying karsevaks was set on fire, killing 58. It led to Gujarat riots, that claimed 1,926 lives. Narendra Modi was accused of condoning violence

5 AUG 2020

Prime Minister Narendra Modi performs Bhoomi Pooja for the temple

THE TEMPLE



WHY RAM LALLA?

The idol was initially named Ram Lalla as it represented the infant form of Ram. Later, it was renamed 'Balak Ram' as it depicts the deity as a five-year-old boy in a standing posture. Ram Lalla was a litigant in the court case over the disputed site in 1989, being considered a "juristic person" by the law. He was represented by Triloki Nath Pandey

4,000
labourers worked on construction

70%
of the 70 acre plot will be left vacant for plants

FUNDS FOR THE TEMPLE

A lot of the money for the temple was received as 'donations'. VHP had started a donate 'Rs 1 for a Ram Mandir brick' campaign. Nirmohi Akhara, one of the 3 claimants in the land case, said VHP swindled Rs 1,400 crore from the donations.

REBUILDING AYODHYA

₹1,800 cr Temple budget | **₹5,500 cr** Donations

₹1,450 cr
Airport cost: (Maharishi Valmiki International Airport)

₹430 cr
Railway cost

TOURISM BOOST

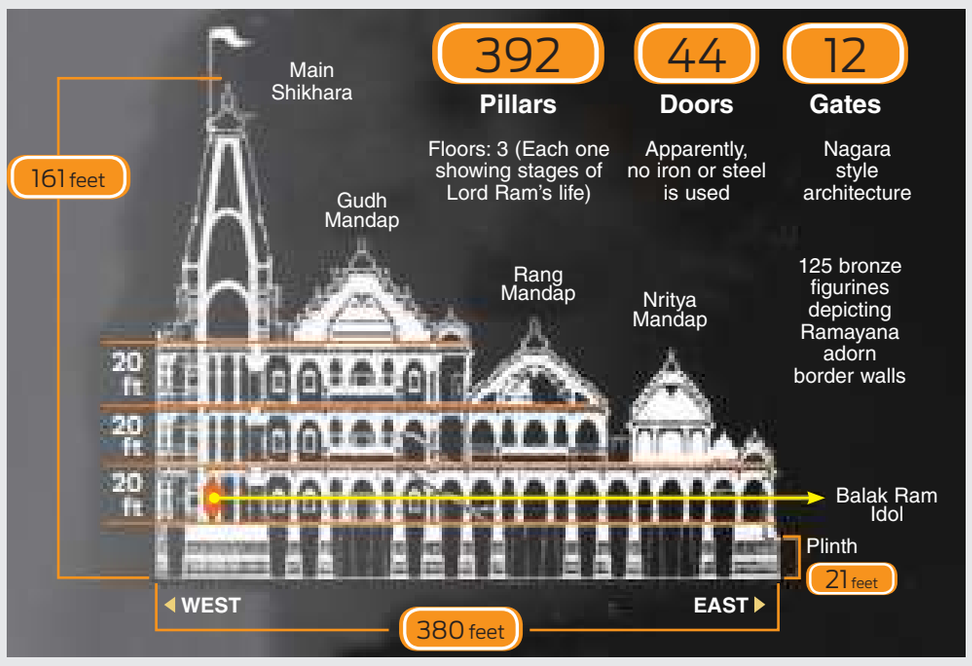
- 40-50 million tourists expected to visit annually
- Hospitality industry to witness the biggest growth
- 3 new upscale hotels to come up

INVESTMENTS

- Stocks related to airline, retail holding and travel services have skyrocketed. UP govt has invested Rs 85,000 crore for Ayodhya redevelopment till 2031
- 20 times increase in land prices
- At least 14,000 people expected to get employed

MODERN AMENITIES

- Bank/ATM
- Bathing area, washrooms
- Emergency medical facilities
- Ramps/lifts for senior citizens
- Medical and locker facility for 25,000
- Sewage treatment plant, water treatment plant, water supply for fire safety and an independent power station
- TV/cinema/AV based show theatre
- rayer hall, a lecture hall, an educational facility, museum and cafeteria

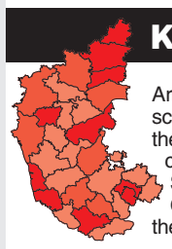


- Brass-ware from UP
- Teakwood from Maharashtra
- Foundation has soils of 2,587 regions such as Jhansi, Shivaji Fort, Golden Temple and Thailand.
- 'Shaligram' rocks from Nepal

TEMPLE POLITICS

The top four Shankaracharyas who are heads of 4 major Hindu mutts refused to attend the consecration ceremony as it was not done according to Sanatan Dharma and the temple construction was incomplete. Opposition parties declined BJP's invitation to the ceremony and dubbed it as a politically driven one. CPI(M) slammed BJP and RSS for converting a religious ceremony into a state-sponsored event involving Modi, Yogi Adityanath. Rahul Gandhi said that Modi and RSS "captured" the event and turned it into an "election function". Meanwhile, TMC said, "We don't believe in mixing politics with religion."

KARNATAKA CONNECT



Arun Yogiraj, a fifth generation sculptor from Mysuru, sculpted the 5-year-old Ram idol. Yogiraj was among the three shortlisted sculptors who were asked to carve the idol. The idol was sculpted using Krishna Shila stone sourced from from an active quarry in Gujjegowdanapura near Mysuru. The rock used is the oldest rock from South India

Research: Amina Afaq, Saptarshi Chakraborty, Aarati Krishna, Shreshtha Dutta,
Graphics: Mahesh Kini

PHOTO: X

Billionaire Sultan Ibrahim sworn in as Malaysian King

KUALA LUMPUR, 31 JAN

The billionaire sultan who rules Malaysia's Johor state was sworn in as the nation's new king Wednesday under a unique rotating monarchy system. Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar, 65, took his oath of office at the palace and signed the instrument of the proclamation of office in a ceremony witnessed by other royal families, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Cabinet members. A coronation ceremony will be held later. One of the richest men in the country, Sultan Ibrahim has an extensive business empire ranging from real estate to telecoms and power plants. The candid monarch has close ties with Anwar and his rule could bolster Anwar's unity government, which faces a strong Islamic opposition. Nine ethnic Malay state rulers have taken turns as king for five-year terms under the world's only such system since Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957. Malaysia has 13 states but only nine have royal families, some that trace their roots to centuries-old Malay kingdoms that were independent states until they were brought together by the British. *—AP*

PHOTO: X

150 killed in 24 hours, says Gaza Health Ministry

JERUSALEM, 31 JAN

Gaza's Health Ministry says 150 people have been killed in the territory in the last 24 hours and another 313 were wounded as Israeli forces continue to battle militants, even in the northern part of the territory. The north, where entire neighbourhoods have been flattened, was the initial target of Israel's ground offensive in late October. Israel's military said on Wednesday that its forces killed more than 15 Hamas militants in northern Gaza over the past day and targeted militant infrastructure in a school. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected two key demands made by Hamas in indirect cease-fire talks, saying that Israel will not withdraw from the Gaza Strip or release thousands of jailed militants. The latest deaths bring the Palestinian death toll from Israel's offensive to 26,900, according to the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths but says most of those killed were women and children. Hamas' 7 October attack in southern Israel that sparked the war killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and about 250 people were taken hostage, according to Israeli authorities. *—AP*

Taiwan holds army drills against Chinese threat

KAOHSIUNG, 31 JAN

Almost every day, Chinese warships sail in waters around Taiwan and warplanes fly toward the island before turning back. What if they suddenly attacked? Taiwan's military began a two-day drill at sea and in the air on Wednesday to practice defending against such a surprise attack. Journalists observed the training from fast boats that escorted a mine-laying ship. "Any unilateral irrational action could very easily escalate tensions and sabotage stability in the Taiwan Strait region," Maj Gen Sun Li-fang, a defence ministry spokesperson, told reporters at the Tsuoying Naval Base in southern Taiwan. China claims the self-governing island of 23 million people as its own territory and says it must come under Beijing's control. The long-running divide is a flashpoint in US-China relations. As relations between the rivals have deteriorated in recent years, fears have grown that America could get pulled into a war if hostilities break out. ***—PTI***

Imran Khan given 2nd jail sentence in two days

Imran Khan & wife sentenced to 14 years in jail in Toshakhana case

ISLAMABAD, 31 JAN

Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were sentenced to 14 years in prison on Wednesday in a corruption case for retaining expensive state gifts when he was in power, dealing another blow to the jailed former Pakistan premier, a day after he was handed a 10-year jail term for leaking sensitive state secrets.

The verdict, which comes eight days before the 8 February general elections, has increased the legal woes of the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician who is already serving a three-year jail term after being convicted of corruption.

Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) faced numerous troubles before the election starting with the denial of its election symbol, the cricket bat, to the rejection of nomination papers of Khan, former foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and several other party leaders.

Accountability Court Judge Mohammad Bashir conducted the hearing at Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail, where the former premier is incarcerated, in the Toshakhana corruption case.

Khan and his wife were also barred from holding any public office for 10 years and slapped with a fine of Rs 787 million each.

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and Bushra Bibi, his wife, sign documents as he submits surety bond over his bails in different cases, at an office of Lahore High Court in Lahore, Pakistan

PHOTO: AP/PTI

Bushra Bibi did not appear before the court on Wednesday.

Bushra Bibi, 49, reached the Adiala jail after her conviction in the case and offered her arrest.

The Judge in the case had also convicted another former premier Nawaz Sharif in July 2018 ahead of elections. Reacting to the verdict, PTI's current chief Gohar Khan said the judgment only served to lower the respect of the judiciary.

"The accused were not given time and the process was hurried to conclude the trial," he said, adding that the defence was not given the right of cross-examination.

- The verdict, which comes eight days before the 8 February general elections, has increased the legal woes of the 71-year-old cricketer-turned-politician

Last month, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) filed a fresh case against the two in an accountability court for retaining a jewellery set received from the Saudi crown prince against undervalued assessment.

Khan told the court that his wife had nothing to do with the case and was being humiliated by being forcibly dragged into it. At the outset of the hearing on Wednesday, Judge Bashir asked Khan if he recorded his statement.

To this, the former premier said that he would submit his statement once his lawyers came. ***—PTI***

RED SEA MASSACRE

US Navy shoots down Houthi claimed missile

JERUSALEM, 31 JAN

A US Navy destroyer in the Red Sea shot down an anti-ship cruise missile launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels, the latest attack targeting American forces patrolling the key maritime route, officials said Wednesday.

The attack late Tuesday night targeted the USS Gravely, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, the US military's Central Command said in a statement. "There were no injuries or damage reported," the statement said.

A Houthi military spokesman, Brig Gen Yahya Saree, claimed the attack in a statement Wednesday morning, calling it "a victory for the oppression of the Palestinian people and a response to the American-British aggression against our country."

Saree claimed the Houthis fired "several" missiles. something not acknowledged by the US Navy. Houthi claims have been exaggerated in the past, and their missiles sometimes crash on land and fail to reach their targets.

The Houthis claimed without evidence on Monday to have targeted the USS Lewis B. Puller, a floating landing base used by the Navy SEALs and others. The US said there had been no attack. Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea over Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza. But they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade between Asia, the Mideast and Europe. *—AP*

PHOTO: US NAVY

- The attack late Tuesday night targeted the USS Gravely, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, the US military's said

ICJ delivers its judgment in Ukraine vs Russia case

THE HAGUE, 31 JAN

The United Nations' top court is ruling on Wednesday in a case in which Ukraine accuses Russia of bankrolling rebels in 2014 and discriminating against Crimea's multi-ethnic community since its annexation of the region.

It is the first of two decisions by the International Court of Justice linked to the decadelong conflict between Russia and Ukraine that exploded into a full-blown war nearly two years ago. Wednesday's legally binding final ruling comes in a case filed in 2017, accusing Moscow of breaching conventions against discrimination and the financing of terrorism. Kyiv wants the court to order Moscow to pay reparations for attacks and

A Dutch domestic court convicted two Russians ***PHOTO: AP/PTI***

crimes in eastern Ukraine, including the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which was shot down by Russia-backed rebels on 17 July, 2014, killing all 298 passengers and crew.

At hearings last year, a lawyer for Ukraine, David Zionts, said that pro-Russia forces in eastern Ukraine "attacked civilians as part of a campaign of intimidation and terror. Russian money and weapons fuelled this campaign."

Among the attacks was the downing of MH17. A Dutch domestic court convicted two Russians and a pro-Moscow Ukrainian in November 2022 for their roles in attack and sentenced them in their absence to life imprisonment. *—AP*

FARMERS' PROTESTS

A delegation from the Belgian Young Farmers association blocks the main highway between Paris and Brussels in Halle, just outside the Belgian capital; Farmers warm themselves around a bonfire as they block a highway with their tractors, in Ourdy, south of Paris on Wednesday

PHOTO: PTI

15 killed in terrorist attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan

KARACHI, 31 JAN

Heavily armed terrorists launched three coordinated attacks, including one on a high-security prison, in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province, leaving four law enforcement personnel and two civilians dead and triggering a gunbattle in which nine of the militants were also killed.

The attacks took place on Monday in Mach town, some 70 kilometres from the provincial capital Quetta, officials said.

A press release issued from the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) on Tuesday night said that on the night between 29 and 30 January, "multiple terrorists, including suicide bombers, attacked Mach and Kolpur Complexes in Balochistan, which was effectively responded by law enforcement agencies (LEAs)."

Nine terrorists were killed and three injured and captured by security forces

- ISPR said that on the night between 29 and 30 January, "multiple terrorists, including suicide bombers, attacked Mach and Kolpur Complexes in Balochistan, which was responded by LEAs

when they tried to apparently penetrate the high-security central Mach Jail where some dangerous militants and death row prisoners are incarcerated.

The ISPR also confirmed the death of four security personnel and two civilians since Monday night. It said security forces in the vicinity were immediately mobilised and were carrying out an "ensuing operation". "Nine terrorists, including three suicide bombers, were "sent to hell till now" while three were injured," the statement said.

A senior police official earlier said at least 15 rockets were fired at the Central Mach Jail. The banned separatist group the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) Majeed group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. After the attacks, a heavy gunbattle lasting several hours ensued between the security forces and the attackers who tried to retreat into the mountains. The caretaker Balochistan Information Minister Jan Achakzai said that the final clearance operation in Mach is still underway. *—PTI*

US announces H-1B visa selection criteria

WASHINGTON, 31 JAN

The US has announced a major overhaul of its annual lottery for the H-1B speciality occupation visas, popular among Indian IT professionals, to curtail the potential for fraud and improve and streamline the registration system.

Separately, the US on 29 January has formally launched a pilot programme to renew the much sought-after H-1B visas domestically, a move that is likely to benefit thousands of Indian tech professionals. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

The new overhauled system, among other things, includes the provision of a beneficiary-centric selection process for registrations by employers.

PHOTO:X

As a result, unlike in the past when multiple applications by an individual often resulted in abuse in fraud of the system, the H-1B visa applications would now be counted and accepted based on individual applicants.Even if one individual files multiple applications for various companies, they would be counted as one application based on their personal credentials like passport numbers.

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) also announced a set of new rules which are aimed at strengthening the integrity of and reducing the potential for fraud in the H-1B registration process. *—PTI*

Nobel Prize nominees close; Ukraine, Gaza war on agenda

STAVANGERM, 31 JAN

The doors close Wednesday on nominations for the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize, with peace activists connected to the wars in Gaza and Ukraine among the known entries.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee keeps the nominations secret, but those with nomination rights sometimes make their picks public. Attempts to find an end the war in Gaza have been a theme for some of the announced nominations.

Academics at the Free University Amsterdam said they have nominated the Middle East-based organisations EcoPeace, Women Wage Peace and Women of the Sun for peace efforts between Israelis and Palestinians.

"They are bringing communities together to build peace in the Middle East with a special focus on the role of women and climate justice," the university's Peace and

PHOTO: X

- Nobel Committee said those with nomination rights sometimes make their picks public

Conflict Studies department wrote.

Norwegian lawmaker Ingvild Wetrhus Thorsvik told newspaper VG that she had nominated Palestinian video journalist Motaz Azaiza for documenting conditions in Gaza. The prestigious prize typically attracts more than 300 entries from academics connected with peace studies, lawmakers of national parliaments, former winners and others with nomination rights. *—AP*

Maldives Oppn accuses President

MALE, 31 JAN

The largest Opposition party in the Maldives on Wednesday accused President Mohamed Muizzu's administration of protecting criminals, hours after an attack on the Prosecutor General, according to local media reports.

"Prosecutor General Hussain Shameem was attacked on a street in Male City. He is receiving treatment for his injuries at the ADK Hospital," Sun.mv, a news portal, said. Condemning the attack on Shameem earlier in the morning, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) in a statement said "The alleged close ties between top government officials and criminal gangs were resulting in open violent assaults on top state officials."

The MDP accused President Muizzu's administration of failing to provide proper protection to officials charged with fulfilling constitutional duties and responsibilities.

"This party also notes that after having successfully driven down violent assaults in the Maldives during the former administration, such crimes have increased after President Muizzu took office," the portal reported, quoting the MDP statement. *—PTI*

CHILD EXPLOITATION

Tech CEOs testify before Senate committee

WASHINGTON, 31 JAN

Sexual predators, addictive features, self-harm and eating disorders, unrealistic beauty standards, Bullying- These are just some of the issues young people are dealing with on social media — and children's advocates and lawmakers say companies are not doing enough to protect them.

On Wednesday, the CEOs of Meta, TikTok, X and other social media companies are testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee about child exploitation on their platforms, as lawmakers, families and advocates are growing increasingly concerned about the effects of social media on young people's lives.

While Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg is a veteran of congressional hearings since his first one over the Cambridge Analytica privacy debacle in 2018, it will only be the second time for

PHOTO: X

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew and the first for Linda Yaccarino, the CEO of X. Snap CEO Evan Spiegel and Discord CEO Jason Citron are also scheduled to testify.

"We understand that they are companies and they have to make profit. But when you're faced with really important safety and privacy decisions, the revenue in the bottom line should not be the first factor that these companies are considering," said Zamaan Qureshi, co-chair of Design It For Us, a youth-led coalition advocating for safer social media. "These companies have had opportunities to do this before they failed to do that. So independent regulation needs to step in."

Meta will likely be a central focus of the hearing, as the Menlo Park, California-based tech giant has been sued by dozens of states that say it knowingly and deliberately designing features on Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms and failed to protect them from online predators. *—AP*

PHOTO: PEXELS

Rupee rises 6 paise to close at 83.04 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

The rupee appreciated 6 paise to 83.04 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, supported by a firm trend in domestic equities.Market participants remained cautious ahead of the interim Budget, scheduled to be presented on 1 February, traders said, adding that a strengthening American currency in the overseas market also capped the sharp gain in the local unit.At the inter-bank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.11 against the greenback. The unit hit an intraday low of 83.12 and a high of 83.01. Local unit finally settled at 83.04 (provisional) against the dollar, higher by 6 paise from its previous close."Indian rupee gained on positive domestic markets and expectations of fresh FII inflows." *—PTI*

Gold prices up by ₹50; silver remains flat

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Gold prices rose Rs 50 to Rs 63,350 per 10 grams in the national capital on Wednesday amid gains in precious metal prices globally, according to HDFC Securities.The yellow metal had closed at Rs 63,300 per 10 grams in the previous trade.Silver prices remained flat at Rs 76,700 per kilogram."Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets are trading at Rs 63,350 per 10 grams, up Rs 50 against the previous close," Saumil Gandhi, senior analyst of commodities at HDFC Securities, said.In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,040 per ounce, up USD 2 from the previous close.Gold traded with modest gains on Wednesday, however, trading volumes remained low as traders avoided directional bets before the most-awaited US Federal Reserve's FOMC (Federal Open Market Committee) meeting policy outcome, Gandhi added. However, silver remained flat at USD 23.12 per ounce. Traders expect gold and silver prices to remain volatile this week, amid volatility in the dollar index and the outcome of the FOMC meeting, Rahul Kalantri, Vice President of Commodities at Mehta Equities Ltd, said. *—PTI*

Park Hotels fixes IPO price band at ₹147-155

KOLKATA, 31 JAN

Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels on Wednesday said it has set a price band between Rs 147 and Rs 155 per equity share for its initial public offering (IPO).The company, through its IPO, aims at raising Rs 920 crore comprising Rs 600 crore through a fresh share sale and Rs 320 crore through an offer for sale, it said.The issue is scheduled to be active from 5 to 7 February. The floor price of Rs 147 reflects 53.45 times the price-to-earnings ratio based on diluted EPS (earnings per share) for the fiscal year 2023.While cap price of Rs 155 translates to a ratio of 56.36 times.These ratios compare favourably with the industry average of 73.60, the hotel major said. *—PTI*

ITC joins hands with Argentine Football Association

KOLKATA, 31 JAN

Diversified conglomerate ITC on Wednesday announced that it has joined hands with the Argentine Football Association (AFA) to promote its snacks, pasta and noodles brands.The collaboration will be for a one-year period under which the members of the World Cup-winning football team will endorse the Kolkata-headquartered company's food brands.Company's association will help promote its food brands since the World Cup-winning team has a strong fanbase in Kolkata," Vice-president & Suresh Chand said. *—PTI*

RBI asks Paytm to stop services after 29 Feb

It will stop accepting deposits or top-ups in accounts

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

In a major action against Paytm Payments Bank (PPBL), the Reserve Bank on Wednesday directed the lender to stop accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer accounts, wallets, FASTTags and other instruments after February 29.

However, any interest, cashbacks, or refunds may be credited back to customers anytime.

The direction follows persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns, the central bank said in a statement.

On March 11, 2022, the RBI had barred PPBL from onboarding new customers with immediate effect.

Paytm group firm PPBL did not offer any comments on the RBI's direction against the bank.

"No further deposits or credit transactions or top ups shall be allowed in any customer accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, NCMC cards, etc. after February 29, 2024, other than any interest, cashbacks, or refunds which may be credited anytime," the RBI said.

Any interest, cashbacks, or refunds may be credited back to customers PHOTO: ANI

Further, withdrawal or utilisation of balances by its customers from their accounts, including savings bank accounts, current accounts, prepaid instruments, FASTags, and National Common Mobility Cards are to be permitted without any restrictions, up to their available balance.

"No other banking services, other than those ... like fund transfers (irrespective of name and nature of services like AEPS, IMPS, etc), BBPOU and UPI facility should be provided by the bank after February 29, 2024," it added.

RBI also said the 'nodal accounts' of One97 Communications Ltd and Paytm Payments Services are to be terminated at the earliest, in any case not later than February 29, 2024.

One97 Communications, which owns Paytm brand, holds a 49 per cent stake in Paytm Payments Bank Limited but classifies it as an associate of the company and not as a subsidiary.

Settlement of all pipeline transactions and nodal accounts (in respect of all transactions initiated on or before February 29, 2024) should be completed by March 15, 2024 and no further transactions would be permitted thereafter, RBI added.

- The direction follows persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns, the central bank said in a statement. On March 11, 2022, the RBI had barred PPBL from onboarding new customers with immediate effect

Indian Highways Management Company, the arm of NHAI, barred Paytm Payments Bank from issuing FASTags after it found that Paytm Payments Bank was not following the parameters prescribed in the service-level agreement.

"The RBI's move primarily targets Paytm's banking operations, allowing customers to still utilise Paytm for digital payments as long as their account remains connected to an external bank, even after February 29," explains Gaurav Goel, Founder-Director, Fynocrat Technologies. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF BUDGET

Nifty climbed 203.60 points or 0.95 per cent to 21,725.70 PHOTO: PTI

Markets rebound to settle nearly 1% higher

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

Benchmark equity indices climbed nearly 1 per cent on Wednesday on buying in HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries.

Investors are eyeing the two important events lined up ahead -- the interim budget and the US Fed interest rate decision -- to derive further cues from.

Recovering all the early lost ground, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 612.21 points or 0.86 per cent to settle at 71,752.11. During the day, it zoomed 711.49 points or 1 per cent to 71,851.39.

The Nifty climbed 203.60 points or 0.95 per cent to 21,725.70.

Among the Sensex firms, Sun Pharma, Tata Motors, State Bank of India, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti, Bajaj Finserv, Power Grid and UltraTech Cement were the major gainers.

Larsen & Toubro declined over 4 per cent after its December quarter earnings. Titan also ended lower from the 30-share pack.

In Asian markets, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower while Seoul settled in the green.

European markets were trading on a mixed note. The US markets ended mostly down on Tuesday.

"A positive build-up was reflected in Indian markets prior to the interim budget, although expectations are low, the market anticipates a lower fiscal deficit supported by buoyant tax revenues. The overall trend in the market is akin to a see-saw, and the buy-on-dips strategy is effective as of now. Global market cues are mixed ahead of the FOMC meeting, and US 10-year yields were marginally down," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude declined 0.91 per cent to USD 82.12 a barrel. *—PTI*

Capex thrust to bridge infra gap: Ex-NITI VC

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Former NITI Aayog vice chairman Rajiv Kumar on Wednesday said the government needs to continue its focus on capital expenditure in the upcoming interim budget, as private investment is 'still weak' and there is a need to bridge infrastructure gap, which has been 'plaguing' the Indian economy.

Kumar noted that increase in capital expenditure during the Modi government period is showing results in terms of the much better quality of the infrastructure and this was needed to make Indian industry globally competitive.He said because of rising indirect tax revenues and also the widening direct tax base, the finance minister will also achieve fiscal consolidation targets.

- Kumar said due to rising indirect tax revenues and widening direct tax base, finance minister will achieve fiscal consolidation targets

"The capex thrust will continue because the private investment still remains a bit weak. And also, we need to overcome the infrastructure deficit that has plagued our economy and also the logistics cost, which are very high and can only be covered by rising public capital expenditure" he said. *—PTI*

Import duty on phone components cut to 10%

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

A day ahead of the interim budget, India has slashed the import duty on spare parts, like battery cover, lens and SIM socket, used in mobile phone manufacturing to 10 per cent, from 15 per cent.

The duty cut is aimed at boosting local production and exports, as well as reducing prices in local markets.

The finance ministry on 31 January, notified the cut in duty on all goods for use in manufacture of cellular mobile phones to 10 per cent.

The other components include battery cover, front, middle and back cover of phone, main lens, screw, SIM socket, or other mechanical items.

The components include battery cover, middle and back cover of phone, SIM socket, or other mechanical items PHOTO: ANI

Telecom Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on X said the duty rationalisation would strengthen the mobile phone manufacturing ecosystem through this measure.

"Rationalization of customs duties brings much-needed certainty and clarity for the industry," Vaishnaw said.

GTRI Co Founder Ajay Srivastava said the duty cut will have no impact on improving export competitiveness of mobile phones made in India as all inputs, parts, and components used in the making of mobile phones for exports can already be imported at zero duty under various government schemes like SEZ, Advance authorisation. Firms like Apple use these schemes.

The Indian Cellular and Electronics Association (ICEA) Chairman Pankaj Mohindroo said this is a critical policy intervention by the government towards making mobile manufacturing competitive in India. *—PTI*

Samsung faces drop in profit, expects progress

SEOUL, 31 JAN

Samsung Electronics on Wednesday reported an annual 34% decline in operating profit for the last quarter as sluggish demands for its TVs and other consumer electronics products offset hard-won gains from a slowly recovering computer chip market.

Samsung said it expects its business to improve throughout 2024, forecasting larger demands for semiconductors that power artificial intelligence features increasingly used in smartphones, personal computers and other products. However, macroeconomic uncertainties could continue to affect its business in the near-term.

Samsung's operating profit was measured at 2.8 trillion won ($2.1 billion) for the three months through December, compared to 4.3 trillion ($3.2 billion) from the same

period last year. Its operating profit for the full year 2023 was at 6.5 trillion won ($4.8 billion), which marked an 85% decline from 2022 and represented the company's lowest since 2008, when global markets were weathering a financial crisis.

While semiconductor division posted a loss of USD 11 billion in 2023, the losses narrowed during the fourth quarter, with the DRAM business returning to profit. Company said in October that it plans to more than double its production capacity of advanced high-bandwidth memory chips in 2024 to respond to demands created by AI. *—PTI*

SEBI bans individual from markets for unregistered PMS business

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Markets regulator SEBI has restrained an individual from the securities markets for a period of two years for providing unregistered portfolio management services.

The regulator also directed Sanbun Investments, its proprietor Nishaan Singh (Noticee) to cease and desist from acting as or holding himself out to be a portfolio manager. Sebi directed the noticee to refund Rs 16.19 crore received from clients and/or investors as fees or consideration or, in respect of their unregistered portfolio management activities within a period of three months, Sebi said in its order on Tuesday.

The order came after Sebi received a complaint in October 2022 against Sanbun Investments, which is the sole proprietorship concern of Nishaan Singh. Pursuant to the receipt of the complaint, the regulator conducted an investigation to ascertain the veracity of the complaint and whether there had been any violation of PMS (Portfolio Managers) regulations.

Sebi directed noticee to refund Rs 16.19 cr received from clients as fees in respect of their unregistered portfolio PHOTO: PTI

"I note that under the garb of providing courses related to the securities market, the noticee has been offering portfolio management services and providing recommendations to the clients in private groups and luring investors/ clients to invest in the securities market by assuring positive returns," said Anitha Anoop, Chief General Manager of Sebi's Quasi-Judicial Cell 1.

SEBI noted noticee has been offering portfolio management services without obtaining the registration from in violation of PMS rules."I note that the noticee has received a total credit for a sum of Rs 16.19 crore in his two bank accounts towards the portfolio management services offered by him, and are liable to be refunded to the respective clients," Anoop said. *—PTI*

Tata led discoms receive higher service ratings for FY23

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

PHOTO: PIXABAY

Tata Power on Wednesday said six discoms wherein it is a stakeholder have received higher consumer service ratings for FY23 among utilities nationwide.

Union Minister for Power and New and Renewable Energy RK Singh launched Consumer Service Ratings of DISCOMs (CSRD Report) during the Review Planning & Monitoring (RPM) meeting of the power sector in New Delhi recently. "Tata Power-led six discoms serving over 13 million consumers across various parts of the country have been featured among the top-rated discoms in the country. Company's power distribution utilities in Delhi and Odisha have received higher rankings in the third edition of the report. The report captures the current status of consumer services across various DISCOMs," the company said.

Tata Power Delhi Distribution Ltd (TPDDL), a joint venture of Tata Power and the Delhi government, is among the top discoms, achieving A+ ranking among all the 62 rated discoms in the country.Discoms TP Central Odisha Distribution Ltd (TPCODL), TP Northern Odisha Distribution (TPNODL), and TP Western Odisha Distribution (TPWODL) saw their grades jump to B+ during FY23. *—PTI*

Govt names 4 members of 16th Fin Commission

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

The Government has appointed former Expenditure Secretary Ajay Narayan Jha and SBI Group Chief Economic Advisor Soumya Kanti Ghosh, and two other members of the newly-constituted 16th Finance Commission.

The Commission, chaired by former Vice Chairman of Niti Aayog Arvind Panagariya, will have 4 members, who will be assisted by Secretary Ritvik Ranjanam Pandey, two Joint Secretaries and one Economic Advisor.

Besides Jha, who was also a member in the previous 15th Finance Commission, retired bureaucrat Annie George Mathew and Artha Global Executive Director Niranjan Rajadhyaksha have been appointed as full-time members of the 16th Finance Commission. Mr. Ghosh will be a part-time member, the Finance Ministry said in a notification.Government constituted the Commission under the chairmanship of Panagariya on 31 December, 2023. Besides suggesting tax devolution between the Centre and States and revenue augmentation measures, the Commission would review the present arrangements for financing disaster management initiatives. Finance Commission is a constitutional body that gives suggestions on centre-state financial relations. *—PTI*

OWING TO HIGH PRICES

Gold demand dips 3% to 747.5 tons in 2023

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

India's gold demand witnessed on-year decline of 3 per cent at 747.5 tonnes in 2023, and going ahead the spurt in demand could be anywhere between 800-900 tonnes, if prices hold out and are not significantly volatile, the World Gold Council said in a report.

The country's total gold demand stood at 774.1 tonnes in 2022, according to the World Gold Council (WGC) Gold Demand Trends report 2023.

"India's gold demand in 2023 declined by 3 per cent to 747.5 tonnes, strongly influenced by rising gold prices. Although consumer interest remained high, it lagged trade sentiment. October's price correction during Navratri stimulated a robust consumer response, boosting Diwali sales in November.

"However, demand declined in December as gold prices resumed an upward trend, resulting in a 9 per cent drop in fourth quarter jewellery demand compared to the same period of 2022," WGC Regional CEO, India, Somasundaram PR said.

Price of gold was volatile throughout 2023, with the yellow metal reaching a new high of Rs 61,845 per 10 gm on 4 May in the domestic market and USD 2,083 an ounce in global markets, and this trend continued with the precious metal reaching another high of Rs 61,914 per 10 grams in 16 16 November.

Price of gold was volatile in 2023, with the yellow metal reaching a new high of Rs 61,845 per 10 gm on 4 May PHOTO: PIXABAY

- Price of gold was volatile throughout 2023, with the yellow metal reaching a new high of Rs 61,845 per 10 gm on 4 May

Looking forward to 2024, India's gold demand should benefit from ongoing positive economic conditions and if the prices hold out are not significantly volatile there is likely to be a big spurt in demand which could be anywhere between 800-900 tonnes, he said.

The total jewellery demand in India dropped by 6 per cent to 562.3 tonnes in 2023, compared to 600.6 tonnes in the previous year, the report stated. Meanwhile, the total gold investment demand in the country grew by 7 per cent to 185.2 tonnes, compared to 173.6 tonnes in the previous year, the WGC report said. Total gold imported to India in 2023 was 780.7 tonnes, up by 20 per cent compared to 650.7 tonnes in 2022, according to the report. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

BCCI secy Shah reappointed as ACC chairman

NEW DELHI, 31 JAN

Indian Cricket Board (BCCI) secretary Jay Shah was on Wednesday appointed as the president of the Asian Cricket Council for a third consecutive term. Shah's extension was proposed by the Sri Lanka Cricket president Shammi Silva for the second time and the nomination was unanimously backed by all the members of the ACC at its annual general meeting in Bali. Shah initially assumed the role in January 2021 succeeding Bangladesh Cricket Board President Nazmul Hassan. Under Shah's leadership, the ACC successfully organized the Asia Cup in T20 format in 2022 and ODI format in 2023.I am grateful to the ACC Board for their continued trust. We must remain committed to ensuring the all-round development of the sport with a special focus on regions where it is still in its infancy.—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Sarvanan qualifies for Paris Olympics in sailing

ADELAIDE, 31 JAN

Asian Games bronze medallist Vishnu Saravanan became the first Indian sailor to qualify for successive Olympics as he cut the Paris Games at the World Championships here on Wednesday.A Subedar from the Mumbai-based Army Yachting Node, the 24-year-old secured qualification for the upcoming Paris Games by finishing 26th out of 152 participants in the ILCA-7 World Championship here. He thus becomes the first Indian sailor to cut Paris 2024.Vishnu secured the top rank among Asian countries, surpassing gold medallists from Singapore in the Asian Games and medallists from Hong Kong and Thailand in the Continental Qualifiers.—*AP*

India beat Egypt 6-4 to finish fifth at FIH Hockey5s WC

MUSCAT, 31 JAN

The Indian team clinched an exciting 6-4 triumph over Egypt to finish in place at the FIH Hockey5s Men's World Cup here on Wednesday.Goals for India were scored by Mohammed Raheel (8′), Pawan Rajbhar (9′), Maninder Singh (10′, 23′), Mandeep Mor (11′), and Uttam Singh (13′), while for Egypt captain Amr Sayed (14′, 19′), Mostafa Ragab (23′), and Karim Atef (24′) found the back of the net for their team.India dominated from the outset, with Mohammed Raheel and Pawan Rajbhar scoring to establish a 2-0 lead. The momentum continued as Maninder Singh, Mandeep Mor, and Uttam Singh added goals in quick succession, extending India's advantage.—*AP*

Patna Pirates tie with Bengaluru Bulls

BENGALURU, 31 JAN

Patna Pirates shared points with the Bengaluru Bulls in a thrilling 28-28 tie during their Pro Kabaddi League meeting here on Wednesday.Sandeep Kumar (14 raid points) and Ankit (8 tackle points) were the star performers for the hosts.The Bulls fielded a fresh raiding lineup, with Sushil making all the difference in the opening minutes. The youngster came up with a marvellous 'Super Raid', putting his side 5-1 ahead, besides reducing the opposition to just two men.The Pirates, who were missing skipper Sachin, recovered well to avoid the 'All-Out' before fighting back through Ankit in defence and raider Sandeep.—*PTI*

It will be a tough choice: Rathour on Sarfaraz and Patidar

India wouldn't have lost the Hyderabad Test if Kohli was captain: Vaughan

VISAKHAPATNAM, 31 JAN

India's batting coach Vikram Rathour on Wednesday said it will be tough to pick one among Sarfaraz Khan and Rajat Patidar in the second Test against England.

The match begins here on Friday with hosts India seeking to draw parity after losing the series opener in Hyderabad.

After the first game, India faced injury concerns with all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and KL Rahul being ruled out of the second Test in addition to the absence of star batter Virat Kohli. This forced the selectors to add uncapped Sarfaraz Khan Sourabh Kumar and Washington Sundar to the squad and Rajat Patidar also made the team. It will be a tough choice.

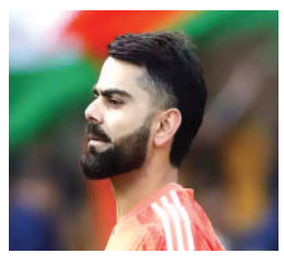
What value they bring to the team of course is that they are superb players. We have seen how well they have done in domestic cricket in the last few years Rathour said of the reinforcements during a press conference.

India would t have lost the Hyderabad Test to England if **Virat Kohli** was their captain according to former English skipper Michael Vaughan who believes Rohit Sharma completely switched off during the game. In a dominant position after taking a 190-run first-innings lead a Kohli-less India collapsed to a shocking 28-run defeat in spin-friendly conditions handing England a 1-0 lead in the five match-series. It was India's first-ever Test loss in Hyderabad. Kohli missed the opening game and will also sit out the second Test in Visakhapatnam due to personal reasons. They missed Virat Kohli's captaincy massively in Test cricket. Under Virat's captaincy that week India wouldn t have lost the game. —*PTI*

Rajat Patidar ***PHOTO: PTI***

Sarfaraz Khan ***PHOTO: PTI***

Vikram Rathour ***PHOTO: PTI***



Virat Kohli ***PHOTO: PTI***

'Bazball' comes naturally to us: Crawley

England opener Zak Crawley on Wednesday said most of his teammates have become better players since embracing the ultra-aggressive 'Bazball' approach, which is way more compatible with their natural game than the traditional "take-your-time" strategy.England upstaged India by 28 runs in the opening Test in Hyderabad despite conceding a 190-run first-innings lead, showcasing a fighting attitude that stunned the pre-series favorites. England are yet to lose a Test since pioneering 'Bazball' under their New Zealand coach Brendon McCullum."I suppose it ('Bazball') comes quite naturally as a lot of our teams are playing more aggressively. —*PTI*

ICC rankings: Ashwin retains the No. 1 spot

Senior India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin maintained the top spot while compatriot Jasprit Bumrah jumped to fourth in the latest ICC bowling rankings released on Wednesday. Ashwin who had grabbed a match haul of six wickets in India's 28-run loss in the opening Test against England is on 853 rating points while pacer Bumrah who also claimed half a dozen wickets rose a rung to fourth. The third Indian in the top 10 in the bowling charts is left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja at number six.Jadeja also enjoys a healthy buffer at the head of the Test all-rounder rankings. However, Joe Root who has moved up to fourth place. —*PTI*

Leach to miss the 2nd Test

England's most experienced spinner Jack Leach is all set to miss the second Test against India starting here on Friday owing to a left knee injury sustained during the series-opener in Hyderabad. Leach didn t take part in the team's training session on Wednesday and was seen receiving treatment from the physio on the sidelines.

—*PTI*

Mayank Agarwal on a hospital bed in Agartala. ***PHOTO: X***

Mayank says he is fine and gearing up for a comeback

AGARTALA, 31 JAN

Karnataka skipper Mayank Agarwal on Wednesday said he is on the mend and gearing for a comeback after a day-long hospitalization caused by a suspicious liquid he drank on-board a New Delhi-bound flight here.

Agarwal was admitted to a hospital here on Tuesday after falling sick mid-flight and his manager lodged a police complaint alleging foul play. The cricketer left for Bengaluru on Wednesday after being discharged.

"I am feeling better now. Gearing up to come back. Thank you for prayers, love, and support, everyone!" Agarwal posted on X, along with pictures of him on a hospital bed.

he had consumed the spurious liquid from a pouch kept on his seat and complained of uneasiness. The opener even vomited a couple of times. His Karnataka teammates eventually took off for Surat via New Delhi on the same flight.

"We are thankful to Karnataka Cricket Association (KCA) and Tripura Cricket Association (TCA) for their unwavering support to Mayank Agarwal during treatment at ILS hospital in Agartala," Karnataka manager Ramesh Rao told reporters after his discharge.

"We thought Mayank would require at least two or a day's stay in the hospital but the doctors and nurses have made it within 24 hours," he added.

The 32-year-old, who has played 21 Tests and five ODIs for India, later filed a police complaint alleging foul play. He will miss Karnataka's next Ranji Trophy clash against Railways.

"We don't want to speak about the past. Mayank is fit to board the flight. We are going to Bangaluru and his family will decide on the further course of treatment," Rao said when asked whether Agarwal would take any legal action against Indigo. —*PTI*

INDIA BATTERS PERFECT REVERSE SWEEPS

India's captain Rohit Sharma with teammates during a practice session ahead of the second Test match between India and England, at Dr YS Rajashekar Reddy ACA-VDCA Cricket Stadium ***PHOTO: PTI***

Avani to spearhead Indian challenge

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

The eloquent Avani Prashanth will be accompanied by five other Indians as the region's finest young golfers get ready for the sixth Women's Amateur Asia-Pacific Championship in Pattaya, Thailand.

This week the event returns to the Siam Country Club, which hosted the tournament two years ago. As many as 22 countries will be represented by 90 golfers.

Besides Avani, India will be represented by Vidhatri Urs, Mannat Brar, Heena Kang, Keerthana Rajeev Nair, and Saanvi Somu.

A little over a dozen of the 90 golfers are in the world's Top-100, and they will rub shoulders with players who are from countries in different stages of development of the game.

Avani said, "This tournament is a bookmark event for all of us in our calendars. It gives us exposure to play against the best in Asia, so that is one big advantage. "And just what the APGC does for all of us we're all so grateful for.

—*PTI*

Akhil Sheoran bags bronze

CAIRO, 31 JAN

Paris Olympic quota winner Akhil Sheoran won his second career individual ISSF World Cup stage medal, clinching the men's 50m rifle 3 positions bronze here on Wednesday. Akhil shot 451.8 in the eight-man 45-shot final, after qualifying in second place with a score of 589. The seasoned Jiri Privratsky of the Czech Republic won gold with 462.9, while France's double junior world champion Romain Aufrere bagged silver after finishing with 460.5.The effort meant that India concluded their engagements at the season-opening World Cup stage with medals of every color.—*AP*

Arsenal put pressure on Liverpool with Forest's win

LONDON, 31 JAN

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta said his side's Premier League title challenge was building momentum after the Gunners beat Nottingham Forest 2-1 on Tuesday to move up to second in the table. Gabriel Jesus and Bukayo Saka were on target at the City Ground as the Gunners moved to within two points of Liverpool, who they face at the Emirates on Sunday. Liverpool can stretch their advantage at the top once more when they host Chelsea on Wednesday. Arteta's men had not won away since early December as their push for a first title in 20 years stumbled over the festive period.

But they have won both their games since returning refreshed from a two-week winter break.

"We have to generate some momentum," said Arteta. "We have to prepare well as it is going to be a big game (against Liverpool). Forest had won all of the previous three meetings between the sides at the City Ground, including the defeat that mathematically ended Arsenal's title challenge last season.But Nuno Espirito Santo opted to just try and contain Arsenal and Forest's gameplan was undone once Jesus broke the deadlock 25 minutes from time. "Against this team at home, I have seen a lot of teams that have suffered.I am pleased with the performance and winning the game," added Arteta."We had to be patient but have the intention to hurt them all the time and we did that." —*AP*

Gabriel Jesus opens the score for Arsenal at the City ***PHOTO: REUTERS***

Thailand Masters: Kidambi Srikanth through to second round

BANGKOK, 31 JAN

Kidambi Srikanth, Mithun Manjunath, and Ashmita Chaliha had a strong start to their respective campaigns at the Thailand Masters Super 300 on Wednesday. The Indians all won their first match of the tournament in straight sets.

Srikanth, the 24th-ranked player in the world, registered his fifth win in six outings against Wang Tzu Wei. Although Srikanth ultimately won the match in straight sets, he had to toil hard to win the match, ultimately achieving the victory with a scoreline of 22-20 and 21-19.

Kidambi Srikanth ***PHOTO: AP***

At the start of the match, Srikanth played his usual aggressive game and led 10-4 in the opening game. However, Wang Tzu won 7 points on the trot as Srikanth found himself trailing 11-10 at the mid-game break.

After Srikanth saved three game points at 17-20 to win the first game 22-20, the second game was much more consistent as both players tested each other's defenses and it was a difference of 1-2 points all through the match. At the fag end, Srikanth redoubled his efforts and won the second match 21-19.

With this victory, Srikanth confirmed his for the second round clash with another Indian shuttler Mithun Manjunath. Manjunath in his first match registered a much easier straight-game (21-17, 21-8) win over Jason Gunawan of Hong Kong.

—*AP*

REUNITED

Hamed ul Haq meets 'brother' Zeeshan

ISLAMABAD, 31 JAN

For Hameed ul Haq meeting India captain and coach Zeeshan Ali in Islamabad was like reuniting with his separated brother.

More than 36 years have passed since he visited Bengaluru but the former Pakistan Davis Cup captain vividly remembers how Zeeshan's father the late Akhtar Ali would take care of the Pakistan players.

He still remembers how he made the mistake of entering Trivandrum without a valid visa and was sent back by a DIG without causing any discomfort to him.

Hameed now 62-year-old still remembers the generous act of Indian player Srinivasan Vasudevan who took him home when he was struggling to find accommodation in Bengaluru in 1987 when he had gone to the city to compete in a satellite tournament.

He still remembers that Delhi food was as spicy as he would get in Karachi. Hameed honoured with the Pride of Performance (a title in Pakistan) in 2000 is gushing about the fact that an Indian team has come to Pakistan to play tennis. Now that I am meeting the Indian contingent here in Islamabad it feels like I have met my brothers who got separated.

Coach Zeeshan Ali is a very good friend of mine. His father Akhtar Ali also used to help us a lot.

He was like our father and coach he was helping the Pakistanis a lot Hamed told PTI in an interview. During the Asian Cup in Dubai, I lost the semifinal to Zeeshan. In Lahore also I met him. I knew he was coming.

I was waiting with excitement for him. I want to take him home and help him see the city but you know it is not possible in current circumstances. In India and Pakistan, applicants get city-specific visas because of the diplomatic tension between the two countries. Hameed who played Davis Cup between 1984 and 1997 had travelled to Delhi for the Asian Games in 1982 and fondly shared memories of those days. I don t feel I am in a foreign land when I go to India.

India is like Pakistan. The language the food the attire everything is similar. The spicy food that we have in Karachi has the same taste we got in Delhi too. Then in 1987, I played Satellite tournaments in Bombay Bangalore and Trivandrum.

I was facing problems in getting accommodation and India player Vasusevan learnt about it and took me to his home.

—*AP*

Hameed ul Haq ***PHOTO: AP***

Zeeshan Ali ***PHOTO: AP***

Playing gully cricket helped me: Tendulkar

MUMBAI, 31 JAN

Legendary batter Sachin Tendulkar on Wednesday revealed playing gully cricket with a straight boundary back at his first home in the city helped him develop his trademark straight drive, which was later perfected by his coach Ramakant Achrekar.

Invited to attend Sachin Tendulkar's first match of his life by the player himself his friends returned home disappointed as the batsman they had gone to cheer for was out for a golden duck.

The colony s main batsman made some excuses to his group of supporters and was convinced that the dismissal was not Tendulkar's fault the same set of audience thronged the ground for his second match but to their horror he let them down one more time with another first-ball zero. For the third match, Tendulkar avoided calling his friends to the ground hoping for a change in fortunes. But the move did not bring him any luck and all he could do was open his account. Tendulkar nonetheless was relieved with that one run and went back from the ground feeling happy heralding the beginning of a journey that would change the face of cricket forever.

—*PTI*